

What started as a dull, long holiday in Almora, where "nothing ever happens", ends most unexpectedly in a thrilling adventure, for Jiwanti, Pinku, Rajat, Sonia and Vikram, not to mention their dog, Chili.

Pitted against real danger, they bust a gang of idol-lifters entirely on their own. Not even 'K.D.' can stake a claim!

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THE MYSTERY OF THE FAKE ARJUNA



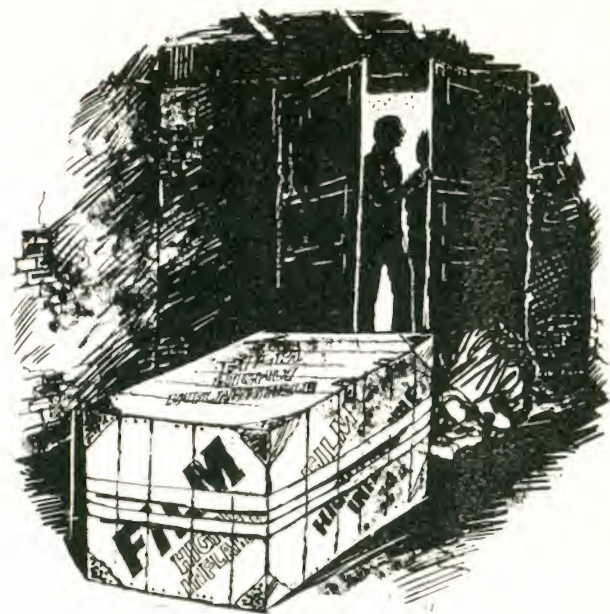
THE MYSTERY OF THE FAKE ARJUNA

CBT

THE MYSTERY OF THE FAKE ARJUNA

By Niharika Joshi

Illustrated by Mrinal Mitra



Children's Book Trust, New Delhi

The Mystery of the Fake Arjuna won the second prize in the Competition for Writers of Children's Books held in 1982 by Children's Book Trust.

Another book by the author is *The Golden Buddha*.

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Holiday in Almora

"JIWANTI, I envy you your job as the librarian here," Sonia smiled, her long lustrous hair tumbling around her shoulders.

"This is just an eight-week leave vacancy, Sonia. From the middle of October, I'll be back at school."

Yet Jiwanti felt a spark of pride. She was the first girl in her family to have the benefit of a formal education. Not yet sixteen and employed!

"Now that my father's leave has been cancelled and he's going to New Delhi, we'll come to your library every day," said Pinku, the fair, fifteen-year-old from a Delhi school.

"You see, father's tour has upset our plans for a trip to the Pindari glacier. Sonia and Vikram were so keen on going that they have come all the way from Durgapur. Now we'll have our holiday here in Almora instead. And you say nothing ever happens here." To emphasise her point, Pinku pushed the newly-acquired spectacles higher up on her nose.

"Well, you never know," piped in the youngest of the clan, hawk-eyed Rajat. Thirteen years old, he was a stubborn optimist.

"Like what?"

"Let me tell you, Jiwanti," said the lanky Vikram, Sonia's twin brother, "I have been hearing nothing else since Sonia and I came here three days ago.

"Last year Pinku, Rajat and their dog Chili,"



Vikram pointed to a small apso sitting at Rajat's feet, "helped capture a Tibetan bandit in Arunachal Pradesh. The case involved a priceless golden idol of Buddha."

Vikram briefly recalled the incidents, while Chili approved his part by lustily thumping his tail on the wooden floor.

"But such things don't happen in Almora," Jiwanti said hastily. "The only break I can think of is the school election a month from now. My brother, Bhoovan, is contesting for President. School and school elections are a lot of fun. Then, on the 10th of October, the Governor is coming here."

"I didn't see that in the papers," said Rajat.

"Stop showing off, Rajat. I know you glance only at the comic strip every day."

"I came to know about it this morning," cut in Jiwanti, nipping in the bud what might have been a verbal bout between Pinku and Rajat.

"Mr. Raina, the Assistant Commissioner and also my boss, gave us the information a couple of hours ago. That would mean we can at least see a number of Kumaoni folk dances."

Jiwanti told them about Almora. Her family belonged to the village of Kabkot in the interior. The previous year Bhoovan and she had won merit scholarships to pursue their studies.

Their parents had left the village and moved to Almora. Jiwanti helped by doing part-time jobs like the one she had now at the Municipal Library and Museum.

Pinku and Rajat were the children of Colonel Johri, who was posted at Almora, while Sonia and Vikram, their cousins, had come from Durgapur.

The five children sat in the library that August afternoon planning how to liven up what looked like

a dull holiday. They were blissfully unaware of certain events taking shape in distant Delhi.

Sinister Plans

THE Jhelum Express from Pune screeched to a halt at one of the well lit platforms of New Delhi railway station.

In the throng pouring out, jostling one another, the tall, lithe and athletic figure of Billu stood out. He wore faded jeans and a sweat shirt.

Suitcase in one hand, the other patting a bristling moustache, he walked briskly out of the station. Soon he was lost in the maze of narrow lanes that Paharganj, just opposite the station is.

"Bade Mia,* Salaam," Billu greeted the white-bearded, scar-faced, middle-aged proprietor of a small restaurant.

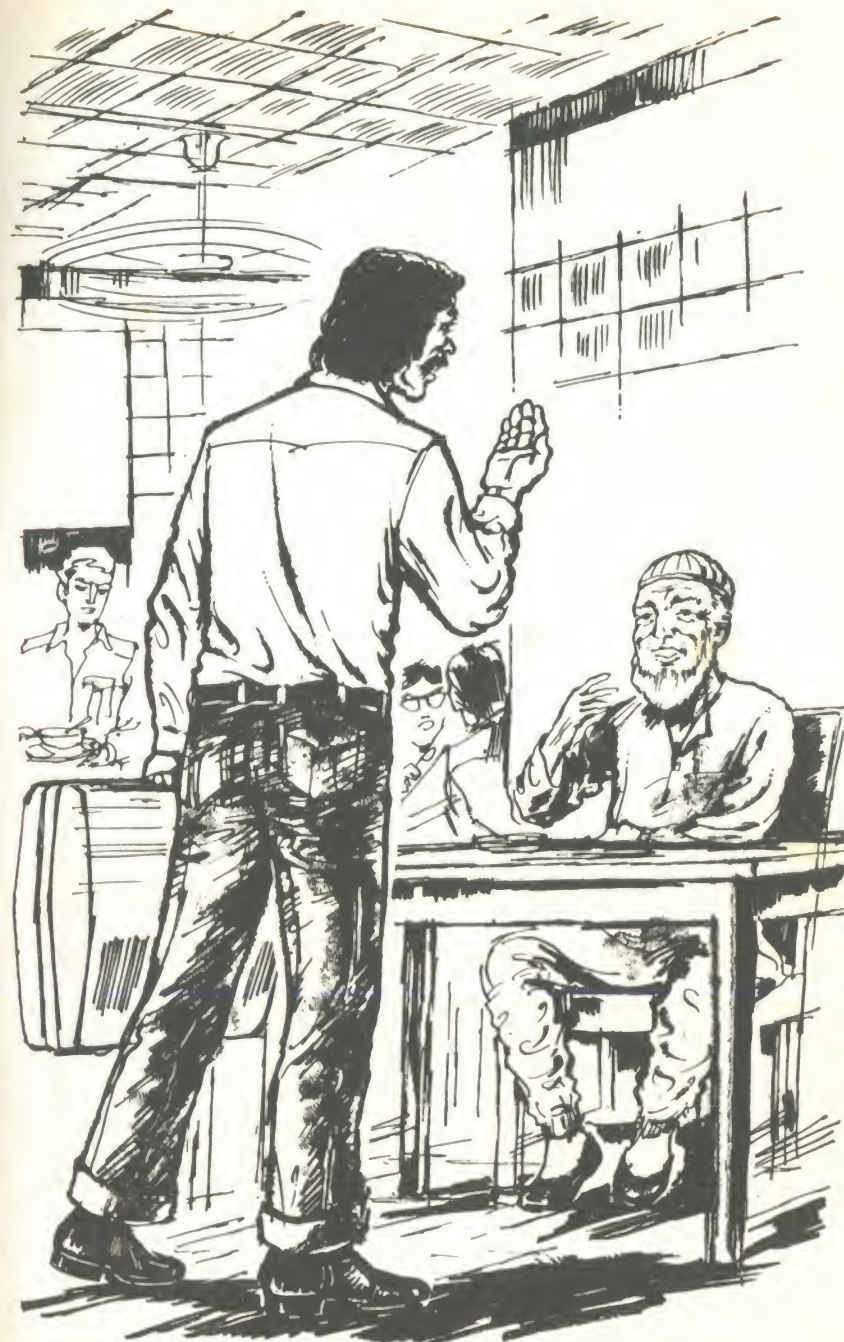
"Welcome to Delhi, Billu," the white beard said smiling. "You are just in time for some delicious *biryani*.**"

Billu sat near the proprietor, who ordered the *biryani* with a jerk of his thumb.

"My restaurant serves the best *biryani* in Delhi. You'll love it."

As Billu ate, the proprietor glanced round at the numerous customers moving in and out.

Then, clearing his throat, he whispered, "Aslam has been here three times looking for you. He has given me the address of the place where you are to meet



* way of addressing an older person ** muslim rice delicacy

him. Tell me, Billu, what is it all about?"

"Just the usual, *Bade Mia*. What we did in Nepal last year. Of course, I have yet to get the details."

"May be the next time you will be staying in some five-star hotel."

"With your blessings, *Bade Mia*, why not? But I'll still come here for this *biryani*."

Billu got up after a few minutes.

"Be seeing you," was all he said.

In the dangerous work Billu was engaged in, safety lay in secrecy and silence. Questions were seldom asked, seldom answered.

At 9 a.m. the next morning Aslam woke Billu up with a glass of hot tea. As he sipped it, Aslam opened the window and parted the faded curtains. A bright sun shone outside. It would be another hot August day.

"Last night I was too tired to talk. Tell me, Aslam, what's up?"

"Your friend Jericho, the one with the blue eyes, has been asking for you."

"Any idea why?"

"He said it's important and that he needed you here at once. That's why I sent you the telegram."

"I'll contact him today. Anyway, Aslam, be very careful. The police haven't yet closed the Nepal case. We managed to get away by the skin of our teeth."

"That's why I stay away from here. The slightest hint and Police Inspector K.D. Rao will be at our throats. I'm told he has come here on transfer. He is the chap who nabbed the Tibetan bandit last year. If he ever gets on to us, we could be written off. We don't want that, do we, Aslam?"

At midday, the sun was hot. Outside the posh Golf Links Colony, the roads were silent. The *durbans* at the gates were dozing under shady trees.

A taxi stopped in front of a sprawling mansion. Billu stepped out, paid the fare and waited for it to drive off.

Then he walked along the road for two hundred yards, turned right and continued walking along a lane. Minutes later, he stood by the rear gate of the house he had seen many times before. Jericho's headquarters.

Was Jericho his name or the name of the organisation? Billu did not know. He only knew the pudgy, oily foreigner, with penetrating blue eyes and a disarming smile.

He called himself Jericho. On the phone that morning Jericho had asked Billu to be at the rear gate at seven minutes past noon.

Billu stood there, wiping the sweat off his face, surveying the neglected backyard and the sloping blue roofs. Then the *durban* appeared and opened the gate.

The young man hurried up the carpeted stairs. He opened the door that faced him, holding the brass knob with a handkerchief, and entered the hall.

Walking past a row of mirrors that covered an entire wall, he shuddered. Why these mirrors with their distorted reflection? Some made you look like a giant, others a midget. Perhaps Jericho did not like to see the world as it was.

Yet another door. Billu pushed it open with his shoulder.

Now he was in a well-furnished heavily carpeted room. Facing him was Jericho.

Jericho looked up and smiled, his blue eyes twinkling.

"Hello, Billu," he said in fluent Hindustani, "how nice to see you." He neither got up nor offered his hand. "Do make yourself comfortable."

Billu sat down. There was silence for a minute, as

they sized up each other.

"You're a cool customer, Billu, and a lucky one, too. Your name is not known even to Inspector K.D. Rao of the Crime Branch. Wouldn't he love to meet you? I believe he is quite sore over your lucky getaway from Nepal."

Billu kept a straight face. The mention of K.D. Rao was most irritating, but Billu preferred not to dwell on it.

"You do not like K.D.," said Jericho, "neither do I. Yet, he is called 'The Crab' by those who know him. Once he sinks his teeth into a case, I believe he never lets go. Would be a useful partner if I could persuade him to join me." Jericho smiled at his own joke.

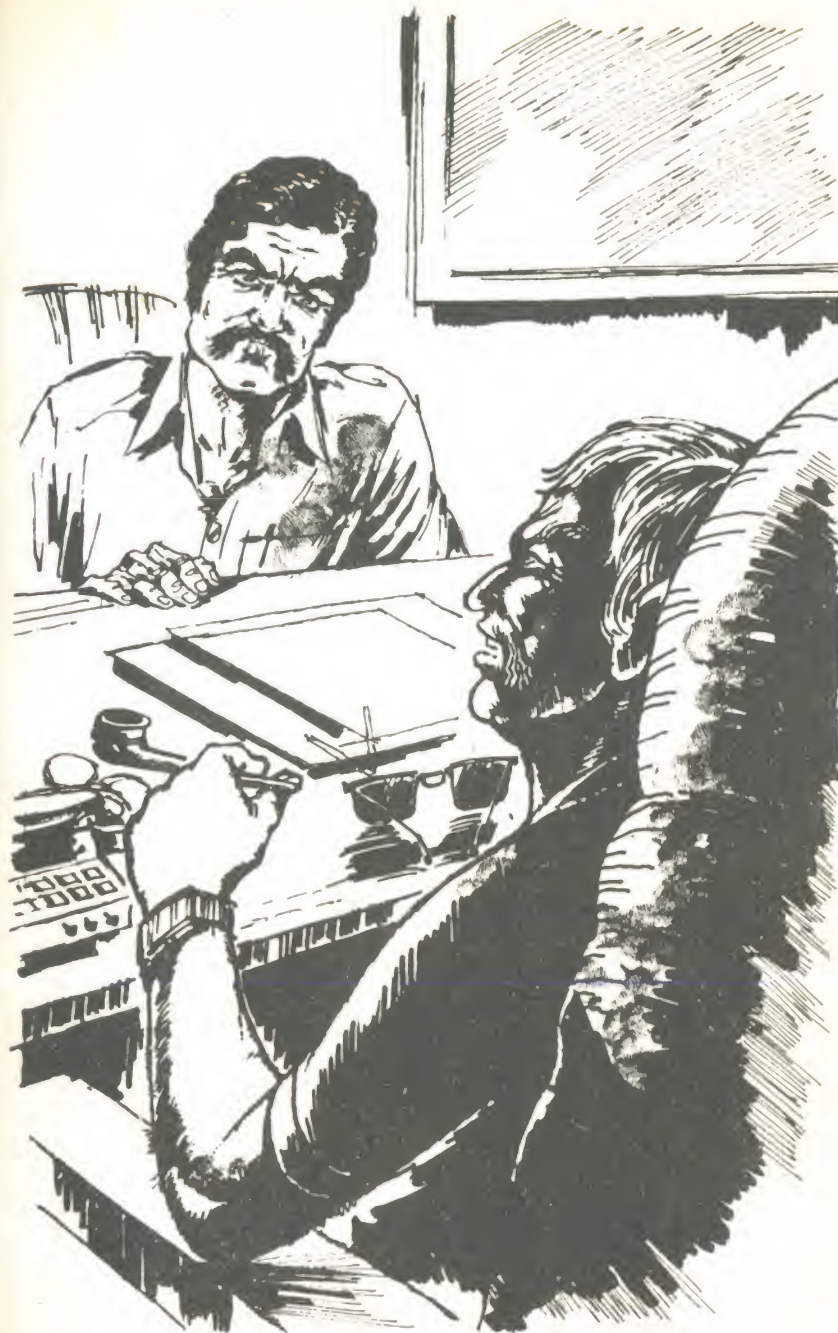
"Just where is this leading to, Jericho?" Billu was relaxed and calm.

Jericho sat silent, looking at the oil painting on the opposite wall, an original Brewster, as if drawing inspiration from it. At last he spoke, looking deep into Billu's eyes.

"In the last fifteen years, a number of people in our business have found useful markets for statues, carvings and idols from the ancient and neglected temples of India. These items are shipped out to private collectors the world over.

"The Indian authorities do not like this. They don't seem to realize how much foreign exchange can be earned if this trade is legalised." Jericho smiled guilelessly.

"Yet what can we do? Collectors are clamouring for more. Most of them are men of taste and immense wealth. They are also our good friends. How can we disappoint them? Besides, Billu, we are entrusting these priceless idols for safe-keeping in the hands of people who can look after them and preserve them for posterity. Isn't this real social service?"



Billu marvelled at Jericho's logic. How convincing he made it sound? If he could talk to K.D. himself, the latter would reward him with a medal. Which country did Jericho belong to? He spoke a host of languages. Jericho continued talking.

"But people like K.D. are making our job so much more difficult. That is why I began by reminding you of him. We must be very careful indeed. Specially now, when I am planning our last haul and the most precious one. This last job I have reserved for you, for I saw the way you went about it in Nepal. Also you are lucky. After this, you can get into some other business. For, once you do this for us, you'll be rich."

At last Billu's mask was penetrated by the clever Jericho. Greed shone on his face.

"How much, Jericho?"

"Guess?"

"I can't. You had better tell me. If it is as much as you make it out to be, may be I won't live to see the money and you know it."

Jericho looked hard at Billu. His eyes were like a python's—penetrating, deadly, mesmeric. Billu felt as helpless as a butterfly pinned on a board.

"Yes, Billu, there are difficulties. The first is, of course, K.D. Secondly, time is very short. The operation must be carried out within five weeks. I must have the object of my desire, the rare idol of Arjuna, by the 5th of October. Now is your chance to play for high stakes. Do this well and you need never do it again."

"How much, Jericho?" Billu felt a chill run down his spine.

"Forty lakhs."

My God! He'd really be rich! Rich beyond his wildest dreams. Just ten years ago, when Billu started on this life of crime, could he have imagined making so much money? He recalled those years and the

twist of fate that had led him here today.

At 22, Billu was tramping the streets of Delhi after he had been rusticated from college. One evening, as he was walking through Paharganj after a meal of *biryani* at the restaurant, he heard a scuffle and a shout and saw a petty thief running off with a ladies' handbag.

While people ran helter-skelter, Billu quietly stood at the street corner. As the thief fled past, he put his foot forward and sent him sprawling, only to be caught by the crowd. A black car was at hand. The incident led to a meeting with Seth Kashiji, who was in the car.

"Here's a reward for your courage," said a soft, pleasant voice and a hand came out with a fistful of money.

"Thank you," said Billu on an impulse, "I don't need your money, Sethji."

"Then, what do you need?"

"A job."

"I see. Can you drive?"

"Yes, Sethji."

"You are hired. Kishen Singh, give the vehicle to our new driver."

Billu drove the Sethji home. A day later, they set out for Nainital. After a few days there Billu took Sethji late in the night on another journey. They passed through Almora and onto the road to Jageshwar, where an ancient temple stood. Midway, when they were in the plains, they had a quiet dinner under the pine trees.

"Shall we drive on, Sethji?" enquired Billu.

"No, we wait here," was his curt reply.

Around midnight, Sethji took out a walkie-talkie and began to receive and send some cryptic messages.

Half an hour later, the car continued towards Jageshwar.

Suddenly, a few miles short of the temple, all hell

broke loose. Lightning flashes lit up the darkness and bullets ripped the car.

Billu at once cut to the right to avoid going down the hill.

For a few seconds after the crash there was eerie silence. Instinctively, Billu crawled towards a clump of bushes as a posse of policemen surrounded the car and its dazed occupants.

By dawn Billu, miraculously unhurt, was limping his way back towards Almora. His only desire was to shut his mind to the night's experience. His first taste of the dangerous game of idol lifting was bitter.

A screeching jeep sent him scampering for cover. It was the police party returning with their 'catch'.

As the jeep in front slowly negotiated the bend, Billu clearly saw the Sethji. Their eyes met. A moment of recognition and the vehicle whizzed past, followed by others.

The last of them disappeared in the distance, Billu noticed a crumpled handkerchief lying by the roadside. He picked it up.

Within its folds was a card with a telephone number and the word "Jericho". Billu was sharp enough to guess that the Sethji must have dropped the handkerchief.

Back in New Delhi, he telephoned Jericho. He had his first meeting with the fat, shrewd, foreigner in the blue roofed house at Golf Links. Before entering the sanctum sanctorum he had to pass through the hall of funny mirrors.

In a short span of time Billu had replaced the Sethji and built up an organisation. With Aslam by his side, he had done a good job of lifting a number of idols from different places.

Billu looked again at Jericho. Now he was being offered so much money for just one statue? Fortune

was certainly smiling on him.

"O.K., Jericho, give me some more details. I'm interested."

"I knew you would be, Billu. We are offering you good money. Ours has been a long association and we would like to part amicably. After the 5th of October, we close our operations here. We will leave you with a fortune. In return, of course, for the fabled idol of Arjuna."

They were both quiet for a minute, each lost in his own thoughts. Then Jericho spoke again.

"I am aware of your sad experience at Jageshwar almost ten years ago. I want you to go there again. For that is where the idol of Arjuna is and that is the idol we want. Let me tell you some more about it.

"As you know the Jageshwar temple is about two hours by car from Almora. It is an ancient temple. Legend links it with the Mahabharat.

"The five Pandava brothers, having won the battle of Kurukshetra with the help of Lord Krishna, ruled their kingdom from the capital, Hastinapur. After many years, they learnt one day, that Krishna had left this world. They were very sad. They felt it was time that they too bid goodbye to this world.

"So Yudhishtira, the eldest Pandava who was King, chose Parikshit, Arjuna's grandson, as his successor. Having crowned Parikshit, the five brothers renounced the world and set out for Shiva's abode beyond the Badrinath and Kedarnath shrines.

"Legend has it that, with the exception of Yudhishtira, the Pandavas perished on the way. Yudhishtira went up to Kedarnath and beyond. It is said that his footprints can still be seen on the rocks beyond Kedar. He attained *moksha** and went to heaven.

"The Pandavas are said to have gone by way of

* redemption

Jageshwar. They rested there for some time. At this temple are a number of idols associated with their visit. One such is a very rare piece. It is an idol of Arjuna, the famed archer, whose exploits have made him immortal in Hindu legend.

"Arjuna's statues are very few. Some are known to be at Mahabalipuram in the south. But, this one at Jageshwar is a rare idol indeed, for it is different.

"You see, the Pandavas first got news of Krishna having attained *moksha* through Arjuna. At that time, Arjuna was fighting the *Bhils*.* During the skirmish, he decided to use his famous Gandeeva bow. As he raised the bow he found that it had lost its lethal powers.

"Stunned, Arjuna retreated and went back to Hastinapur. There he told his brothers how his bow had lost its magical powers. Yudhishtira at once guessed the reason why. It meant that Krishna was no more on earth.

"As soon as the Pandavas made sure that Krishna had departed from this world, they set out on their last journey. Now this statue of Arjuna is without the famed Gandeeva bow. That is why experts have not yet recognised it. That such an idol exists was ascertained from references in old Hindu scriptures. Yet, the experts always looked for statues of Arjuna with the bow.

"About five years ago, some old idols were found at a small temple a few miles from Jageshwar. These were kept at the Jageshwar temple. This rare statue of Arjuna is among those. When he renounced the world, Arjuna renounced his bow too.

"Two years ago a German scholar toured Kumaon. He visited Jageshwar. He showed slides and photographs of the excursion to a select gathering in

* name of a tribe

Stuttgart, Germany, early last year.

"One of our men was also there. When he saw the slides and photographs of these new idols at Jageshwar, he recognised them. For six months, a study was conducted. Our man is sure of his facts. These newly-discovered idols have not yet been examined and dated by experts in India. Before they do so, Billu, you must place this precious Arjuna idol in my hands.

"Since last year the operation has been in my hands. Early this year, I staged a diversion as a preparation for your attempt now. It was a gamble, but it paid off. You see I arranged an unsuccessful attempt on the idols at Jageshwar. We made off with the *ashtadhatu* (eight metal) idol of Pawan Kumar (Hanuman), which is the most valuable of the known statues there.

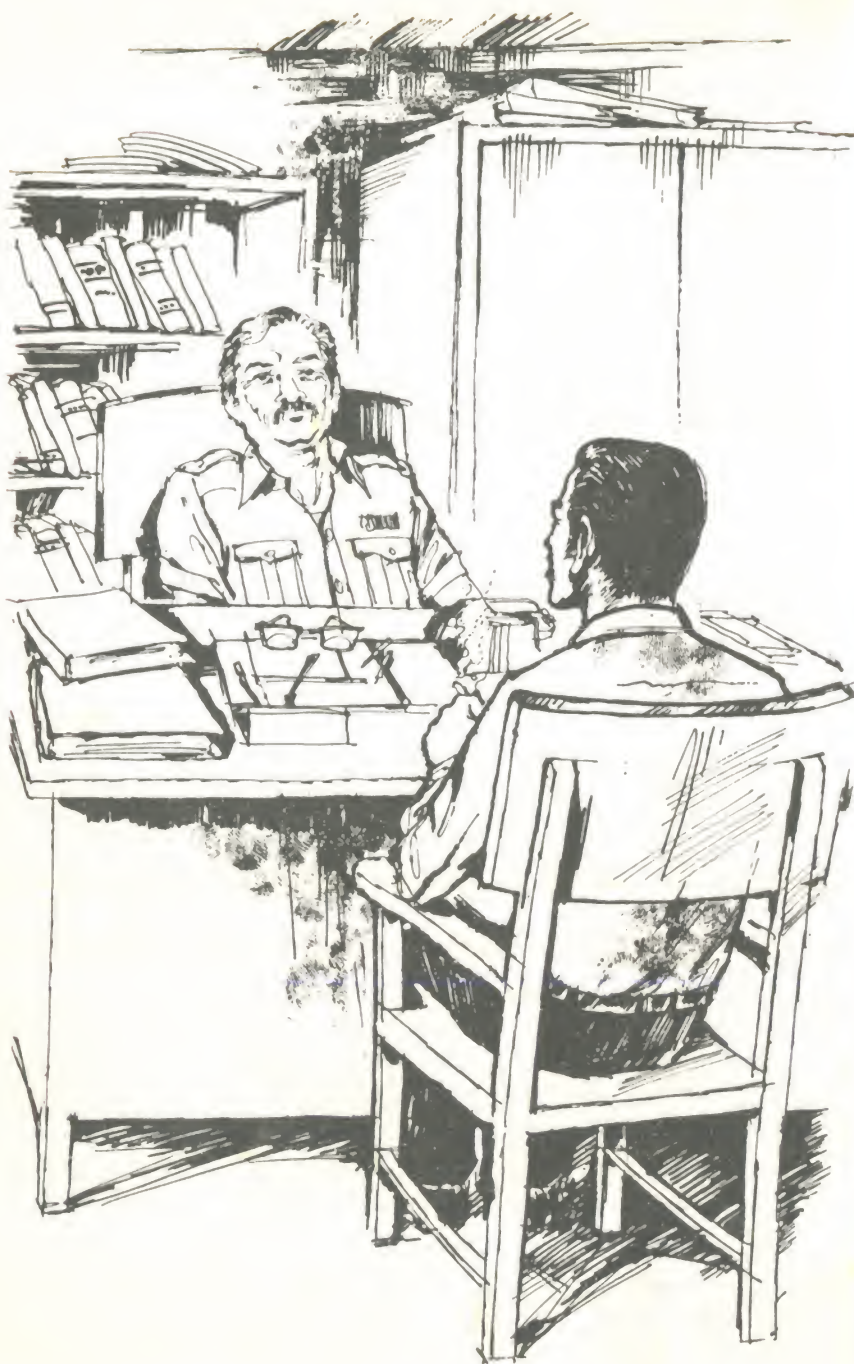
"This, we later arranged to be recovered by the authorities. The idol is now back at Jageshwar, where all the valuable idols are kept in a newly constructed strong room. This room is rather full. The lesser known idols are kept in a casually guarded room outside the main temple.

"While the authorities are protecting the idols inside the strong room, you can quietly spirit away the most valuable of them all from the room outside. Chances are that the theft will not be discovered for some time. If you can replace the original with a clever fake, it may never be discovered at all. That is exactly what I want done."

Jericho passed an envelope across the black table. Inside were a few photographs. Billu looked at them. The idol was not very large, about two to two and a half feet tall. The base was rectangular. The workmanship was of an unusually high order. Indeed, the idol was a rare piece.

"I'll need better photographs."

"You'll have to arrange for those yourself. These



"That man was an underling. I was present at the interrogation. He knew very little, but to escape punishment, he cooperated with us.

"His account was laced with half-truths and inaccuracies. However, he did say he had been to Delhi in March. He spoke of a meeting held in a small restaurant in Paharganj, a place where he said they sell the best *biryani* in town."

"Well, K.D., keep at it." The tired D.I.G. swept his hand across his eyes. "Our reputation is at stake. They made a fool of us in their last operation. Of course, you came here only at the very end of that case and could do nothing except share the blame for our failure."

"Yes, that has been for our good, sir. Because now we are determined to get them."

"I wish I had succeeded in getting you transferred from Chandigarh two months earlier, K.D. Ever since you recovered the Dalai Lama's golden Buddha, I've been wanting to get you here. But you know how slowly our files move."

"Well, sir, that's neither here nor there. Round one was theirs. Now round two I'm sure will be ours."

"I know, K.D., it's not for nothing that you are affectionately called 'The Crab'. I know you will not rest till you have won. When can we go over the latest findings from all our branches, K.D.? I have a strong suspicion that they will spring a surprise on us. It may be best to try and wrest the initiative from them."

"Sir, today I have an engagement that cannot be postponed."

"O.K., K.D., whenever you like. Only, I want action. Let's get cracking."

"I have a feeling in my bones, sir," said K.D. getting up and glancing at his watch, "that we are going to

get action sooner than we expect.”

K.D. reached the sprawling bungalow of Professor Shastri at 7.30 p.m. The invitation was for 5 p.m. Had he not insisted, he would still have been with the D.I.G.

“Good evening, Professor. Sorry I’m late.”

“Welcome, K.D. The guests have taken a good look at my orchids, had their tea and gone. My son Sanjay waited for you till 7 o’clock. Now he’s gone over to his friend’s place for dinner. And I have to go out at eight. Yet I’m happy you came.”

“Well, congratulations, sir. I’m glad the orchids you got from Tuting last year have bloomed. I’m sure the orchid lovers of Delhi have had a feast of beauty and colour.”

K.D. sipped a drink and the two talked of various things.

“So, K.D., what’s up these days? Or is that a secret?”

“No,” smiled K.D. “There are no secrets. I forgot those as soon as I left the office. So, whatever I say is not a secret. However, what I’m dealing with is right up your street. I’m engaged in trying to understand some finer points of the organised crime of idol lifting.”

“Is that so? I am so glad, K.D. I hope you people succeed in doing something. This crime poses a big threat to our culture and heritage. I suggest you come with me at 8 o’clock for I’m going to deliver a lecture. It’s about recent excavations in India. It may be of some interest to you.”

K.D. readily agreed.

The hall was nearly packed when K.D. and Professor Shastri reached the place at 8.15. As the Professor walked towards the rostrum, he was received by a delegation of students and archaeologists from various universities. They took their places in the first two rows of the hall. The rest of the hall was filled with

those who had gathered in response to press publicity.

Professor Shastri delivered a delightful lecture. He showed a number of interesting slides of excavations and artefacts. One of the statues found near Mandu in Madhya Pradesh was mentioned by the Professor as being very valuable. He told the audience that the statue was now kept at the State Museum in Bhopal. It was valued at around fifteen lakh rupees.

“Sir,” interrupted a gentleman sitting at the back of the hall, “would you say this is the most valuable idol recovered since Independence?”

“Well, I can’t say that for sure. You see, actually we don’t price these items. We only date them. This particular piece was nearly stolen last year. At that time the papers reported it was worth that sum of money. That is why it is now kept at Bhopal.”

“Well, sir, would you say it’s more important than the others you have shown us so far?”

“Yes, I think so.” Professor Shastri scratched his chin thoughtfully. “Many pieces have yet to be dated. This is a slow process for there are very few experts. However, from those so far examined, this is perhaps one of the oldest and most valuable.”

A number of questions followed from the front rows. The Professor then continued with his lecture.

K.D. too kept asking questions, but only to himself. Why had this particular query come from the audience? It was about the value of an idol, which was hardly of any archaeological significance. K.D. had vaguely seen the man who asked the question—a blue checked shirt, long wavy hair and a bristling moustache.

A little before the lecture was to give over, K.D. slipped out. He went and stood behind a tree that was between the car park and the exit gate. Ten minutes later K.D. saw the blue shirt, long hair and moustache come out of the hall. He took a step forward.

"Hello, Bihari Lal, how are you? Long time since I met you last in Bombay."

"Sorry, you are mistaken."

"How could I be? You are my old school-mate, Bihari. Don't you remember me? Raghavan—St. George's College, Mussoorie."

"No, never been there."

K.D. smiled a sheepish, apologetic smile.

"Anyway," he persisted, holding him by the left shoulder, "since we are both archaeologists, we are friends. I am Raghavan, Dr. Raghavan of Patna University. And you, where are you from?"

A moment's pause and the stranger replied hurriedly, "Dr. Kewal Singh from Akola."

"My pleasure meeting you, sir. I know Dr. Honmode, Head of the Archaeology Department, very well. Met him in March in London. Has he returned? He was due back in the middle of August."

"Yes, yes. Please excuse me. I'm getting late for an appointment."

The stranger quickly moved out to the road and got into a bus.

"Dreaming again, K.D.? I have been looking all over for you."

Professor Shastri looked curiously at K.D. "Was it boring enough to send you out of the hall?"

"No, Professor. Something else came up. By the way, are those slides yours?"

"Of course not. They are from my office. Why?"

"I should like to borrow them if I may?"

"Sure, K.D. Whenever you like. If it's not urgent, I have another lecture in mid-September. After that, any time. Shall we go back? Your motorcycle stands on my porch, remember?"

When they reached home, the Professor had a visitor waiting for him.

"You'll have to excuse me, Professor," said K.D., "you have a visitor and I've a long day tomorrow. I'll come some other day. Good night."

"What, is that you, K.D.?" said the visitor walking out on to the verandah, his pipe belching smoke. "I can recognise your voice anywhere." It was Colonel Johri from Almora.

They shook hands and the three walked into the drawing room.

"Professor, you didn't invite me but I got to know that your orchids were on display today. Couldn't resist seeing them."

"Welcome, Colonel. I didn't know you were around."

"I was, in fact, on leave, Professor. Should have been on my way to the Pindari Glacier on a trek. Yet, service before self. Leave cancelled and here I am. That's life."

"Have you seen the orchids?"

"Been doing that for the last half hour, Professor. You have a good servant. He sized me up correctly and, when I decided to wait for you, brought me a drink. I have enjoyed the drink and have been admiring your orchids."

"Well, let's all celebrate this meeting, Colonel. You, K.D. and I are getting together after almost a year. The last time we were together was at the Cosmo Hotel in Dibrugarh. Remember?"

"Well, time does fly, doesn't it? Got to be going now. Have to catch the night flight to Calcutta and then be back in three days in Almora. Nice meeting you, K.D. Hope you are not as busy as when we met last?"

"No, Colonel. Relaxed. That's K.D. Just spent an hour listening to Professor Shastri's delightful lecture on recent excavations in India."

"Is that so? Well, Professor, why don't both of you visit Almora?"

"I have a series of lectures to deliver. No, Colonel, no time for a holiday till next summer. K.D. is also busy. He is trying to bust the idol-lifting racket in the country."

"Yes, it's pretty bad. I hope you nab the culprits soon, K.D. It's a shame how easily these people get away with it."

"You see, Colonel, security in our temples and museums is generally lax. Except for a few places, people are very careless. If only we could make them more security conscious, fifty percent of the thefts could be prevented."

"I understand, K.D. You are absolutely correct. I must rush off now. Well, it's nice meeting you. I'm glad I waited."

Birth of a Film Company

ASLAM, dressed in a beige safari suit, presented a picture of opulence. He walked up the drive of a dilapidated house in South Bombay. Outside he had checked the address Billu had given him. An old sign board read 'Venus Pictures Ltd'.

He went round to the rear of the house. On the verandah a mechanic was cleaning an odd-looking camera.

"Is Ustad Merchant in?"

"May be." The mechanic continued to work. There was no change of expression on his face.

"Please give him this card."

A few minutes later Aslam was led inside. In an inner room he saw an old Parsi gentleman puffing at an ornate *hookah**.

"I need your help. Billu sent me. We are starting a film company. We need a good movie camera and a trained, reliable cameraman." Aslam stressed the word 'reliable'.

"What kind of camera?" The Parsi had shrewd penetrating eyes.

"We have to do outdoor shooting. Something portable and sturdy."

"Good. Billu wrote to me. He said the code was 'portable and sturdy'. I have it ready. The man outside is cleaning it. The cameraman is sick. He will come in a day or two. His name is Machiah. He is good and reliable."

"Here's the money, then. This is what Billu asked me to give you. The rest of the instructions are simple. The camera, four cases of film and Machiah must be in Delhi the day after tomorrow, on Sunday the 31st of August. Here's the address."

In less than ten minutes Aslam had arranged what he had come all the way to Bombay for. He walked out of the house whistling to himself.

The Biryani Shop

SUNDAY, August 31. It was hot and humid in New Delhi. The clouds were low but scattered. A grey haired man, around fifty, holding a well used shopping bag

*oriental tobacco pipe

walked along the lanes of Paharganj. It was midday. The man wanted lunch.

"The best restaurant in Paharganj is over there," the *paanwala** pointed to the crowded shop across the square. "They give you the best *biryani* in town. Even the five-star hotels take it from this restaurant."

The man went into the hotel, ate *biryani* with relish and looked discreetly around the place. Then he walked out and drank cold water from the vendor who had parked his portable ice box under a tree. The grey haired man was never seen again in Paharganj.

The next day, another man visited the same restaurant. He was wizened and old and ate very slowly, although he too seemed to enjoy the *biryani* he had ordered. The next day a *mullah***, full of old world courtesy, visited the place.

On the fourth day, the visitor was a driver as his uniform proclaimed, with an emblem in blue and red on his hat. It was as he ate his *biryani* that Billu came there. He sat with the bearded proprietor and began to talk in low tones.

As soon as Billu came in, the driver gulped his food and went out. He took water from the same vendor and pointed casually at Billu sitting next to the proprietor.

When Billu walked out after his meal, the vendor placed a glass of water before him. He gulped it down. As soon as he left, the vendor picked up his glass with a clean cloth napkin and kept it aside. In ten minutes, the water vendor also left. As he went out of the lane, a man with a camera passed him by.

"Was it the man with the moustache? I hope I got the right man?"

"Yes, you got the right man."

That night K.D. was with the D.I.G. On the table

* betel vendor

** muslim learned in Islamic theology

between them, were six photographs of Billu drinking water.

"Sir, this man is a suspect. Of course, I have nothing yet to book him for. He's not on our records."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, sir, we have his fingerprints and photographs."

"Then why the doubt?"

"Sir, this man asked about the price of an idol during Professor Shastri's lecture. Was it the most valuable of the lot and, what would be its approximate price. Valuable in what sense? There is a catch here, sir."

"What else?"

After the lecture, I engaged him in conversation. He tried to fob me off with a false identity. It's another thing that I too gave him a false name."

"That's interesting."

"Also, I saw this man yesterday at the *biryani* shop in Paharganj. I went there on four consecutive days, sir. From the description, I remember, it is this place the fisherman in Bombay referred to. What was this man with a moustache doing in that shop?"

"Where does it lead to, K.D.?"

"Nowhere yet, sir. But I have arranged for our friend to be followed after he left the *biryani* shop."

A Change in Appearance

AT 3 o'clock the next day, Billu met Jericho. The meeting took place at the 'Machan' in Taj hotel. Jericho, for once, looked a little agitated.

"Billu, did anyone speak to you after that lecture by Professor Shastri?"

"Speak to me? No, of course not. Not unless you mean the man who mistook me for a childhood friend." Billu gave Jericho an account of the incident.

"Look, Billu. Someone saw you talking to a stranger. Someone who attended that lecture for me. I have since been making enquiries. Was this the man who spoke to you?"

Billu looked at the photograph.

"Yes. Who's he?"

"That's K.D."

"How on earth?"

"You should not have put that question to Professor Shastri. The man I had sent there would have asked him in any case. That way we could have made sure that no suspicion was aroused. Even if it was, my man would be suspect and not you. Why didn't you wait till the lecture was over? If K.D. were to see the slides in the correct order and remember your question, it might give him a clue to your motives."

"Good heavens, Jericho. That was a mistake. Now, what do I do?"

"Don't panic. K.D. does not know who you are, except that you gave him a false name. The next time you cross K.D.'s path, he must not recognise you."

"How on earth can that be ensured? I can't wear a mask all the time?"

"Simple, Billu. Get yourself a crew cut. Shave your moustache. That should be enough. Even your best friend will not recognise you."

"Jericho, you are brilliant!"

"That's what K.D. will be saying after the 5th of October. Just because he could outwit a Tibetan lama does not mean he can take on Jericho. There are a lot of things K.D. Rao has yet to learn. But, Billu, it is better if you move out of New Delhi as fast as you can. That is the safest course."

The man whom K.D. had detailed to shadow Billu lost his trail within about ten minutes. For Billu was not taking any chances and ducked in and out of lanes and bylanes to avert any possibility of being followed.

Who was this elusive man, wondered K.D. when his man reported that he had failed in his mission.

K.D. had his description flashed to airports, railway stations, bus terminals, hotels and similar other places. Even photographs were sent to police pickets at strategic points.

But to no avail. For Billu was already on his way to Lucknow within a few hours of his meeting with Jericho.

The clean-shaven man, with a crew-cut, who settled down to a comfortable dinner aboard the Lucknow Mail that night, bore little resemblance to the photographs circulated.

At Lucknow, Billu dialled the number given by Jericho.

"Tyagi speaking."

"Lalwani from Nimble Exports," said Billu, remembering the code.

"Yes, yes."

"I'm here on some work. I want to meet you."

"Come to my place at 3 o'clock. You know the address?"

"Yes."

Billu found Tyagi a typical contact man. Jericho certainly had a fine network.

"My name is Baldev Kumar. I own a film company. I need permission to make a film around Almora."

"It'll take a month to arrange that."

"No. I want it by tomorrow. I also need a letter to the district authorities at Almora to assist me."

Billu gave Tyagi a bulky envelope. "Here's my

application.”

The next morning Billu got the papers. Lunch on the flight to Phoolbagh. At Phoolbagh he took a taxi. The following day he was in Jageshwar. He could still remember the familiar bend in the road, and the encounter with the police party. But the lure of the fortune that awaited him on the 5th of October was overpowering.

At Jageshwar, Billu met the Sub-Divisional Officer and showed him the papers he had brought, including a copy of the letter to the district authorities.

“A film about Almora will not be complete without Jageshwar,” he told the S.D.O. “I plan to be here with my film unit around the 15th. Can I take a look at the temple today? I have never been here before.”

“Why not? I’ll take you there myself.”

At the temple, Billu asked if he could photograph the place. In the small room outside the temple, he admired the idols.

“The really beautiful ones are inside,” said the S.D.O.

“Those I’ll film later. Can I take still photographs of these now?”

“Why not? Go ahead.”

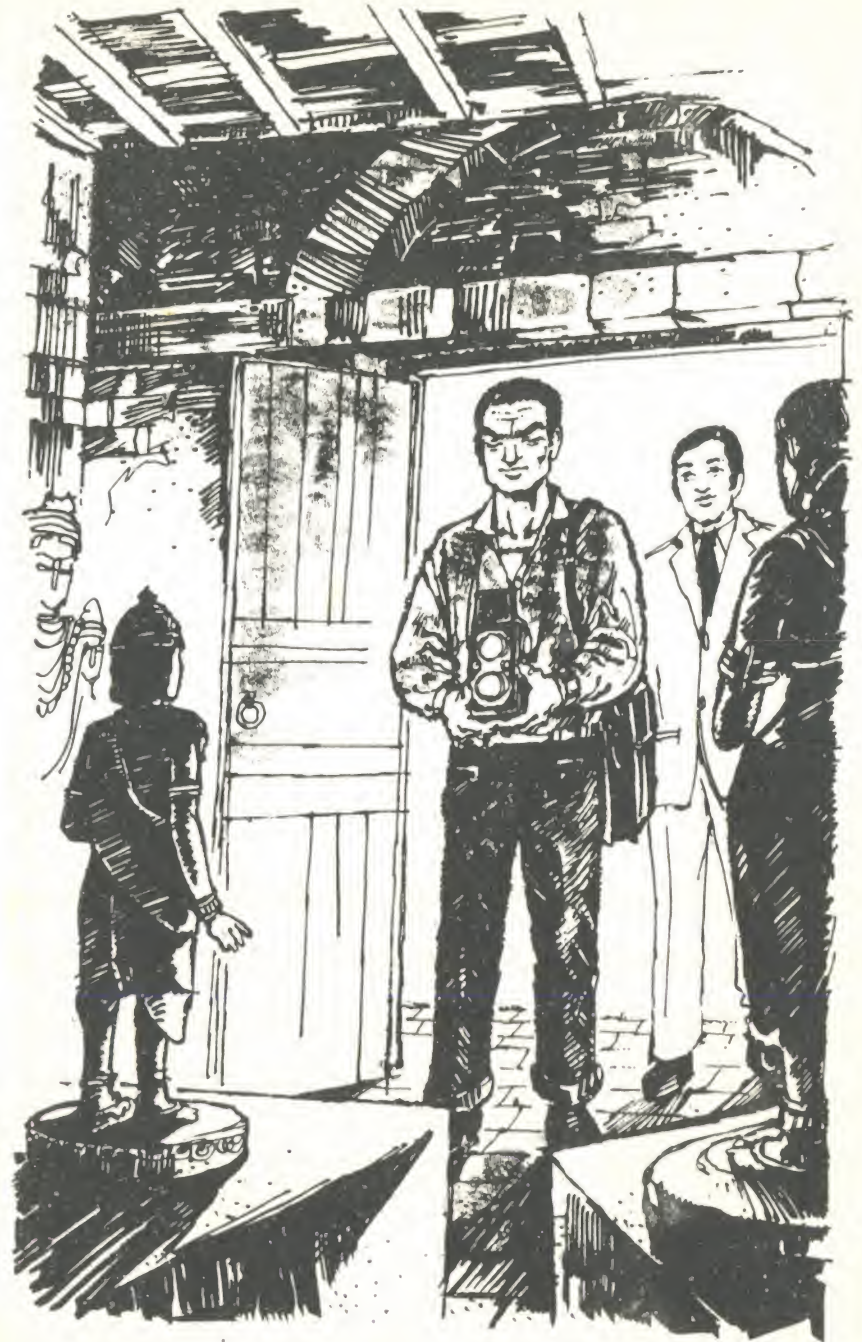
Billu took out a length of white cloth, about six feet long and three feet wide, covered with strange black lines.

“This will act as a foil for the statues,” he explained as he stretched the cloth close behind them. He took several photographs from different angles.

Then they left Jageshwar temple and returned to the S.D.O.’s residence. A visitor was waiting for him.

“Hello, Colonel Johri. How are you?” the S.D.O. greeted him. “I thought you were going to the Pindari Glacier.”

After shaking hands, the S.D.O. introduced Billu.



"How do you do, Mr. Kumar," said Colonel Johri, "nice meeting you. When do you come to Almora?"

"Around the 15th of September."

"You must meet us. Oh yes," he turned towards the S.D.O., "the Pindari Glacier trek had to be cancelled. I had to go to New Delhi urgently. The children are most disappointed. So, today I brought them here. They are shopping near the temple."

While they were having tea, the four children and Chili joined them. Col. Johri introduced the children.

"Uncle, are you going to make a film on Almora?" Rajat asked Billu.

"Yes, son. I believe it's a beautiful place. How do you like it?"

"A nice enough place. Yet, I wish we were on our way to the Pindari Glacier instead."

"Uncle, who is acting in your film?" asked Sonia.

"Well, all of you and the people of Almora. There are no actors. Just real life people and places. I'll make sure that you all feature in the film."

"Oh, really, that would be lovely," said Pinku clapping her hands. "Something to talk about back in Delhi."

"When will you come to Almora, Uncle?" asked Vikram.

"Around the 15th or 16th."

"Make it 16th, Uncle. It's my birthday. You must join us," said Pinku.

"O.K. I'll come and we'll film the birthday party as well."

"How wonderful! We'll be waiting for you at Almora."

The Film Company

THREE days later, Billu was back in Lucknow. He walked through the crowded and narrow lanes of the Chowk, the heart of ancient Lucknow, with an ease that comes with familiarity. In this part of the old city live the sculptors who, for generations, have cut stone into beautiful idols.

Billu was looking for Amar Singh, a well-known artist. He had paid him handsomely once for a job done well.

Would Amar Singh recognise him? If he did not, he might not agree to do the work. It would prove too that K.D. would not recognise him, either. Not that Billu hoped to meet K.D. ever again.

For Amar Singh's benefit, however, Billu had with him an old photograph of his, taken before he cut his long wavy hair and shaved off his moustache.

Amar Singh failed to recognise his old customer.

Billu flashed him a smile and, at the same time, held out the photograph.

"Whew!" exclaimed Amar Singh. "What a metamorphosis!"

"Now to business," whispered Billu after the initial pleasantries. "I have a special job for you, Amar Singh. I need a fake idol. Here are photographs of the original. Also a sample of the kind of stone used."

Billu showed him the photographs he had taken at Jageshwar.

"The black lines at the back give you an idea of the exact measurements. Here are some enlargements as well showing all the details."

Amar Singh closely examined the photographs, enlargements and the sample stone.

"Yes, I can make a duplicate. Which of these idols do you want me to copy?"

"This one," replied Billu. "How soon can I have the duplicate?"

"In a week's time. I have to get the stone from Gorakhpur and treat it chemically. Normally we bury the statues underground to age them."

"I can give you five days."

"It's difficult."

"I'll pay you five times your normal rate, Amar Singh. I want two fakes made. Both should be exact replicas of the original. I'll be back here on the 10th to collect them."

Billu gave Amar Singh a bulky envelope and the deal was through.

8th of September. Aslam had settled down in the one-room apartment over the workshop in Bareilly. He had bought a jeep. It had been freshly painted white. Its engine was being tuned now and its interior modified for the unusual equipment and packages it was to carry.

Aslam read again the words painted in bold blue letters on either side of the wagon—"BLUE ARROW FILM CO"—and grinned.

Machiah was a competent and reliable man. He had brought the camera and four crates labelled: 'FILM HIGHLY INFLAMMABLE.'

Sher Singh was to be the driver. He had done well in Nepal and was a useful man to have around.

The three of them had developed a good working relationship. They waited for Billu.

Billu got there on the 11th of September, with two crates. On these too Machiah put the same labels.

They reached Jageshwar on the 14th.

The 14th of September was a busy day for Mr. Raina, the Assistant Commissioner. He looked around at the seven people who sat across the table.

"The programme for the Governor's visit has been finalised. He is coming on the 10th of October for two days. On the 11th morning, I want a colourful cultural function for two hours depicting the dances and music of Kumaon at the Ramjey School. You will take charge of that, Mr. Budhi Ballabh and Mr. Pande."

The gentlemen nodded assent.

"I take it, Jiwanti, you'll be leading the girls in the dance performance."

"Of course, Mr. Raina...Uncle."

Mr. Raina smiled. "Here, in the office, Mr. Raina. After all, you are incharge of the library and the museum. The Governor will visit them for twenty minutes on the 10th afternoon. Can you take care of that?"

"I think so, Mr. Raina."

"Good. I'm there to give you any help you need. You'll learn a lot, I'm sure. It's good the Governor is coming while you are on the job."

"I hear that some idols from temples are being brought to the museum, Mr. Raina," said Mr. Tewari, the Headmaster of Ramjey School.

"You are right, Mr. Tewari. You had better remember that Jiwanti. Some twenty-five idols will be here soon. Please ensure they are properly displayed."

Turning to the others he continued, "The Governor is a keen archaeologist. This is his first visit here.

There's no time to take him to all the temples. So it's been decided to get some of the idols here."

"I believe he wants to see the newly-excavated ones," said Mr. Tewari.

"You are right again," said Mr. Raina. "A list has been prepared and I'm arranging for the idols to be brought here. I think, Jiwanti, you can use the outer room. Take those books to the store room."

Half an hour later, Jiwanti was briefing Sonia, Pinku, Vikram and Rajat about the visit. Something to look forward to.

"I hope the film company arrives before my birthday," said Pinku.

"It's expected here on the 16th," said Jiwanti. "Mr. Raina said we will have a dress rehearsal of the dances on the 29th, so that the entire programme can be filmed."

"Why not on the day of the Governor's visit?" asked Sonia.

"Well, I believe the film unit has to leave by the 5th of October. They have other work elsewhere. Mr. Raina said they may shoot a part of the school elections as well. It's going to be fun. Already the canvassing is becoming hectic. Have you seen the posters they have designed?"

A Narrow Miss

THE Blue Arrow Film Company began shooting at Jageshwar on the 15th of September. That morning a special prayer and the midday *darshan** were filmed.

"I'd like to get a view of the temples against the sunset," said Billu. "We'll do that in the evening."

"Sure," said the S.D.O. and he briefed the temple *pujaris*.** "When do you film the *arati*?"***

"We'll do that tomorrow before we go to Almora."

"Fine."

In the afternoon Billu, Sher Singh and Machiah went again to set up the cameras.

"Please ask the crowds to move off. I'd like a quiet, unpeopled temple against the evening sun."

The S.D.O. spoke to the villagers. He promised them a close look when the *arati* was being filmed the next day. Soon the place was deserted.

After about twenty minutes, Billu surveyed the scene. No one was around except the S.D.O. Machiah and Sher Singh were at their appointed places. The wooden packing case marked 'FILM' was lying by the door of the outer room where Machiah had casually placed it. The door was open. Billu could see the Arjuna idol inside.

"Can we get some tea here?" asked Billu.

"Why not," replied the S.D.O., eager to please.

* viewing of sacred idols ** priests

*** waving of lamps before the idol



"I'll tell someone." He hurried out to do the needful.

Sher Singh stood outside watching the S.D.O. move away. Billu and Machiah were quick to seize the opportunity. Machiah opened the case marked 'FILM'. Billu went into the room.

"Quick, Machiah, we have just another minute or so."

"He's on his way back," warned Sher Singh. "Hurry! I'll whistle when he draws near."

Machiah took the fake idol from the case and moved forward. Billu waited near the Arjuna idol.

Sher Singh whistled.

Machiah, in trying to hurry, stumbled. The fake idol slipped and hit the ground with a thud.

"It has cracked!" snapped Billu. Quick, take it back. Too late now."

Billu sauntered out as Machiah put the fake quickly back into the packing case and, picking it up, walked away.

The S.D.O. came in.

"Your tea is coming, Mr. Kumar. I met the shop-keeper right outside."

"Thank you."

That night, Billu spoke to Aslam, Machiah and Sher Singh.

"Well, that was bad luck. Can happen to anyone. This fake is of little use now. So, keep it sealed. Lucky, I brought another. Tomorrow we must switch it with the original. I'll arrange an opportunity, don't worry."

The next day, after the *arati*, Billu lingered on at the temple.

"Just a few shots after the people are gone," he told the S.D.O. "Then we leave for Almora."

Ten minutes later a jeep drove up to the temple.

Billu saw a tall, tough-looking man come bounding

towards them.

"Good morning, Sir," said the S.D.O. "Meet Mr. Baldev Kumar. He's making a film. This is Mr. Raina, the Assistant Commissioner from Almora."

"We have been waiting for you at Almora. Colonel Johri asked me to remind you. Today is Pinku's birthday. She has invited you to her party!"

"Of course. We'll leave immediately after lunch."

"Good!" beamed Mr. Raina. Then, turning to the S.D.O., he said, "Here's a list of the idols that have to be sent to Almora. I have brought a van. Have them loaded at once. Oh, yes, where are the new-finds? In that room? Fine! Please send them along too. They are required at Almora for the Governor's visit. I'll send them back around the 15th of October. Is that okay?"

During the drive down to Almora, Billu was in a thoughtful mood.

"This complicates our plans, Aslam. We must find out where the idols are kept in Almora and how well they are guarded. Machiah, keep the damaged fake well packed. We will get rid of it later. Mark the other packing case so that it can be easily identified.

"I'll have to see what we can do in Almora. We'll succeed yet. We almost pulled it off yesterday but our luck ran out. So near and yet so far. But there's no giving up."



Complications Again

PINKU'S birthday party had gone off with a bang.

At Colonel Johri's place, the evening had turned into night and most of the guests had left. But the lights were still bright. Mr. Raina and Billu had just arrived from Jageshwar.

"Sorry, I couldn't film the cutting of the cake. Anyway, we did manage a nice shot of all of you dancing to the music."

"We didn't cut a cake in the traditional fashion, Uncle, although we did have some cake to eat. We are so happy to have you with us."

"Will you be shooting tomorrow also, Uncle?" asked Rajat.

"Not tomorrow, but in a day or so. By the way, how do you spend the time here?"

"Well, we are with Jiwanti until lunch time. We go to the library and the museum and sit and talk."

"Now that the statues have arrived, we'll go and see them tomorrow. Hope we can come, Jiwanti?" said Pinku.

"Not tomorrow. We'll arrange them first. You could come the day after."

"Why don't I film you children inside the museum, admiring those priceless idols?" asked Billu.

"What a lovely idea, Uncle. That way we will all be in the movie, won't we?"

"Would that be okay, Mr. Raina?"

"Sure, why not?"

"Come, gentlemen, the table is laid," Mrs. Johri announced and the children had a second round with the late arrivals.

"Here, Chili, have some cake." Rajat gave Chili a piece of cake.

"Nice dog you have there. Where did you get him from?"

"A gift from Uncle Cheriyan in Tuting."

"Where is Tuting?"

"In Arunachal Pradesh. Daddy was posted there last year."

"Uncle," added Vikram, "Chili was quite a hero there. He helped in catching a Tibetan bandit."

"Really, do tell me about it."

Pinku and Rajat told Billu briefly about the golden Buddha. Sonia and Vikram chipped in with details, Chili wagging his tail vigorously whenever his name was mentioned.

So, wondered Billu, these were the children with Inspector K.D. Rao when they recovered the golden Buddha? Fancy meeting them here. Was it a bad omen? It was the Inspector who had caught the bandit, not these children. They just happened to be around. K.D. was safely away in New Delhi and without him the children surely could be no threat. It was best to befriend them.

"A most interesting tale," Billu said aloud. "I would love to meet your K.D. uncle. He must surely be a clever detective."

"Uncle, he is wonderful. He can sniff out anything fishy."

Yes, thought Billu. How quickly he had found out about him after the lecture that day. Just his luck, Jericho had warned him in time. Now even if K.D. were to see him, he would not recognise him.

"Morning, C.K.," said Colonel Johri coming into the library and greeting Mr. Raina, "I brought the children along, too. Here we are, all ready to be the first ones to admire the new idols in the museum. Good morning, Jiwanti."

Mr. Raina met the children. "Come right in. We have already arranged the idols."

"I have to go in half-an-hour, C.K. I'll leave the children here. They are looking forward to being filmed with the idols."

"Yes, Uncle Kumar is coming at 10 a.m."

For the next fifteen minutes they admired the idols displayed on three tables.

"I say C.K., are you leaving them here like this?"

"Yes. Anything wrong?"

"Look! Isn't it dangerous. They are precious, you know."

"This is Almora, Colonel. Not Delhi or Bombay. Never heard of a robbery or theft here," Mr. Raina smiled.

"I met K.D. in New Delhi a fortnight ago. We talked about idol lifting. K.D. said fifty percent of the thefts could be avoided if museums and temples took more care. Remember what happened at Jageshwar. Why not here?"

"You have a point there, Colonel. What can we do though?"

"We could keep the idols in the small room," suggested Jiwanti.

"Shall we take a look at the room, C.K.?"

The small room could accommodate just two tables. There were no windows or ventilators. It was a store room. The light from the single naked bulb suspended from the low roof was reflected off the white walls, making the room doubly bright.

"Much safer here. You could lock this room as well."

"Yes," agreed Mr. Raina.

"On the day of the Governor's visit, you could arrange them here as you have done today."

"Uncle, we'll put them inside after Mr. Kumar has finished shooting," said Sonia.

"We'll all help Jiwanti," added Pinku.

"O.K., children, do that."

"One more point, C.K. About the keys to the locks. I feel the keys to this small room should be with you and Jiwanti. One of the keys you can keep with you. Deposit the other in the key box inside the Commissioner's office. That way the keys will be distributed. Your office is here. You can open the library. Jiwanti can then open the small room. You could also have an extra *chowkidar*.*"

"One *chowkidar* does the rounds at night. The Commissioner's office is barely a hundred yards away."

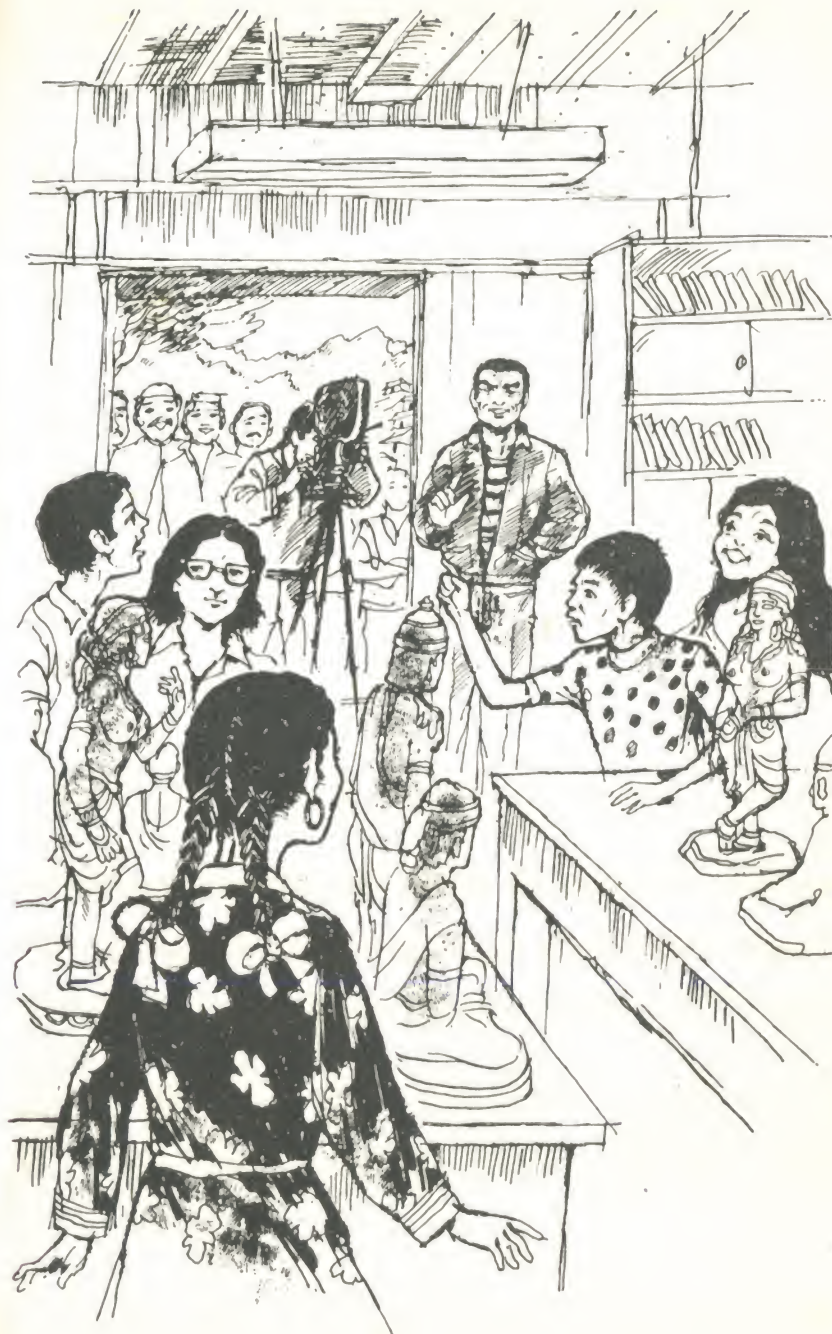
"As long as the idols are here, get a *chowkidar* to keep an eye on the library. The other can continue with his rounds. If you can't get an extra man, let me know. I'll send an armed guard."

"Thank you, Colonel. I don't think that'll be necessary. For a month, I'll get an extra man."

"Okay, C.K., okay, children, you must excuse me now. Have a nice time. Rajat, why don't you think up some pranks for the movie?"

At 10.30 in the morning Billu and Machiah arrived. The children, C.K. and Chili welcomed him. In half-an-hour the shooting was over.

Rajat pulled Sonia's hair as she stood next to a sombre looking idol and made a funny face at Pinku



*watchman

when she was admiring a dancing figurine. He tickled Vikram and at one stage almost had Chili on the table, among the idols.

"Rajat, that's enough. 'Some pranks' was what father said, not some broken idols. Get that dog down." Pinku was stern.

After the shooting, they all sat with Mr. Raina for a cup of tea.

"O.K., children, let's get on with moving the statues. Be careful."

"Why, what's up?" asked Billu.

"Colonel Johri was here. He thought we should keep these statues under lock and key. The children promised to help move them into a smaller room after the shooting. The room will be kept locked."

"I agree with the Colonel," said Billu. "These are rare idols."

Billu made his statement so patently sincere that Mr. Raina was tempted to confide in him. He even told him all about the disposition of the keys.

"Foolproof, indeed," agreed Billu, absorbing every detail. "Well now, we take your leave. It was nice being with you and the children."

Billu and Machiah left just as the children finished moving the idols into the small inner room.

At lunch, Billu pondered over the situation. He told the others what he had learnt at the museum.

"As we were leaving, I saw Jiwanti lock the room. She had a key on a chain she wore round her neck. The other key is with Mr. Raina. The library door keys are also with Mr. Raina and one key is in the key box in the Commissioner's office. And what did you find out, Aslam?"

"Well, a *chowkidar* goes round the Commissioner's office and the library. He goes right upto the other side where he can chat with the sentry at the police post.

The post is manned by two men who patrol the road below and return to the post every hour.

"Mr. Raina is appointing an additional *chowkidar* tonight, exclusively for the library."

"That's bad."

"All because of that busybody, Colonel Johri."

"Can we pick these locks, Aslam?"

"Yes, if I can work at them uninterrupted for fifteen minutes. The inner lock will be easier."

"Not with a *chowkidar* guarding only the library."

"Let's rub him out."

"No. I want a clean affair. No point substituting a fake if we have to vamoose after the switch. An extreme step like that we can think of only if other measures fail. Let me think it over. In the meantime, take a look at the windows, Aslam. Can't we enter through one of them?"

"Right, boss. I'll find out as soon as I can."

A Matter of Slides

IN New Delhi, K.D. had lost track of Billu. All efforts to trace the man had failed. There had been no sign of him in the hotel at Paharganj. He seemed to have lost his appetite for *biryani*.

"Have I alerted him somehow?" wondered K.D. "But how?"

On the 16th of September, Professor Shastri sent him the slides. The Professor himself came over in the evening.

"Anything in these, K.D.?"

"I'll be able to say only after I have seen them in

the same sequence in which you showed them that evening."

The Professor arranged the slides. K.D. kept looking at them again and again. There were twenty-six slides in all. The slide showing the Bhopal idol was the nineteenth.

K.D. started flipping the slides back. Number eighteen, seventeen, sixteen.....

"The man in the audience asked the question after slide nineteen. So my guess is that he was not interested in slides twenty to twenty-six. What interested him was either slide nineteen or one before it. Was he assessing costs or was he comparing...."

"With what?"

"That exactly is the question, Professor. We know the man's reaction from what he said. But what was on his mind?"

"Yet," continued K.D., thinking aloud, "there must be a simpler answer. Why the question when he saw slide nineteen? Because that was when, for the first time, you mentioned the cost of any item at all. If you had given the price of the idol on say slide thirteen and he had not asked the question, it would be reasonable to presume that his interest was between fourteen and nineteen."

"I get your point, K.D. Wish you had briefed me," the Professor said, laughing.

"Yes, Professor. In a way it was lucky you did give the price of the piece on slide nineteen. Or else he might not have asked any question at all. Then I would not have noticed him."

The two were silent for a while. K.D. kept looking at the slides.

"Professor!" exclaimed K.D., eyes twinkling with excitement. "You remember the question he asked? Is this idol more important than the ones you've shown

us so far? Obviously, he is not interested in slide nineteen. Is any other idol more valuable. That's what he wanted to know."

"Go on," encouraged the Professor.

"That means he suspects or knows that something you showed earlier was more valuable. If so, he wants to find out whether an expert like you is also aware of it. Is that possible?"

"Sounds logical, K.D."

"Can you tell me if slides one to eighteen show any idol that could be more valuable though you people may not be in the know? Something you have not dated so far. Something recently excavated, perhaps."

"You have a point there, K.D. Let me take these home. I will list them up to slide nineteen and then examine whether there could be a piece like the one you mentioned. You may be on the right track."

The Keys

THE Ramjey School Union elections were turning out to be a close contest. By the twenty-fifth of September, only Bhoovan, Jiwanti's brother, and Thakur Singh were left in the field.

Thakur Singh was a volatile, hot-tempered student who hated to lose. He was a good sportsman. But coming as he did from an affluent family, he badly wanted to win the elections.

The election campaign started with the odds in his favour. But now luck seemed to be deserting him. So he threw a feast for the boys and girls, spending a

lot of money. His posters were all over the town. And the tide appeared to be turning.

Slogan-shouting boys and girls marched up and down the main street of Almora. The election tempo was high.

On the 25th afternoon, when the children met Jiwanti, she sprang a surprise.

"Can you guess what?"

"No, tell us."

"I'm going to Bombay."

"How come? What about your job and your school?"

"I have always dreamt of big time. Ever since I was in school. Now I have the chance."

"Out with it, Jiwanti?"

"I'm joining the films."

"Yes! But how?"

"Uncle Kumar told me he has friends there. He said I should go to Bombay in October after I am finished with this job."

The children were puzzled. They didn't know what to say.

"Why are you all so glum?" asked Jiwanti. "Aren't you thrilled?"

"Look, Jiwanti," said the patient Sonia, "how well do you know Uncle Kumar after all? He may be joking for all you know."

"No, he's serious. This is the chance of a life-time for me."

"But listen, Jiwanti," said Pinku, "you must ask your parents. You must ask Bhoovan. You can't take a decision like this on your own."

"My parents don't understand. They are not educated. They only want to marry me off. If I had not

won the scholarship, I would have been married by now. That's what happens in the villages. If I stay, the same fate awaits me. Even Bhoovan may not understand."

"And Uncle Kumar does, does he?"

"Please don't be angry, Sonia. I would not have told you if I wasn't sure that all of you would support me. You, however, seem to be against the idea."

"Because we do not know Uncle Kumar well enough. What is his standing in the film world? I haven't ever heard of him before. Even if we had, you can't shoot off to Bombay without your parents' consent. I don't like the idea, Jiwanti." Sonia tossed her hair and shook her head vehemently.

"Anyway, I'm not going now. I'll think it over. Don't tell anyone yet, please."

"O.K. But you must promise not to take any step without consulting us or Bhoovan."

"Promise."

Later, the children discussed Jiwanti's wild idea. They were quite worried.

"She hasn't seen the world yet," said Sonia solemnly. "The most modern city she has seen so far is Almora. She has no idea what Bombay is like. Poor girl."

"Yet she is so pretty and innocent. She could be a success there, you know. But Mr. Kumar is not the man to lure her there." Pinku stressed the prefix 'mister'. Ever since Jiwanti's disclosure, the four children had turned hostile to 'Uncle Kumar'. They felt he was making a fool of Jiwanti.

"He's too glib," said Vikram. "Like over sweet syrup."

"I don't know. Maybe you are right, Vikram," said Sonia. "But what are we going to do?"

"I think someone should talk to her. Someone she trusts. Bhoovan is just a year older. In any case he is

too busy with the elections. Her parents don't understand such things."

"May be we could get Mr. Raina to talk to her. She respects him a great deal. Of course we will have to ask her first. Remember she told us not to tell anyone."

"We'll see tomorrow."

"Naturally," said Rajat, who had been a silent listener. "Tonight we're going to see the Ram Lila."

The same evening Billu met Jiwanti at school. He walked back with her. A little distance from the bazaar they paused awhile.

"I hope you haven't told anyone about your going to Bombay, Jiwanti?"

"The secret is safe, Uncle. Will everything be all right?"

"Of course. Just don't worry. I have to go to Delhi on the 5th of October. Then I'll go to Bombay to process this film I am shooting here. There I'll meet my friends and show them the film I took in the museum, where you feature prominently. I'm sure you will get a break."

"Oh, it will be a dream come true."

"What's that chain round your neck, Jiwanti? Some sort of charm?"

"No. Just a simple chain." Jiwanti entwined the end round her finger and held it out for him to see.

"It looks quaint? Was it made here? Can I take a closer look?"

"Sure, Uncle, why not." Jiwanti took off the chain and gave it to Billu.

Just then Sonia waved to Jiwanti from the jonga cruising on the road below. Jiwanti waved back. The jonga stopped. Vikram got out.

"Aren't you coming to the Ram Lila, Jiwanti? We're all going?"

"Join you there in half an hour. Keep a place for me."

As Jiwanti turned, Billu handed back her chain. In the meantime, he had pressed the key attached to the chain against a blob of wax he had brought in his pocket. He now had the impression of one key.

That night, as the children watched the Ram Lila, Billu walked along the road towards Bright End Corner. At a lonely bend he waited, glancing anxiously at his watch now and then.

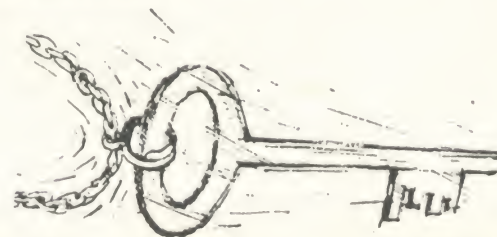
Soon a man joined him.

"I have the impression of the key kept in the Commissioner's office, Billu. Bribe a peon there. I gave him a bottle of rum. I'm sure he'll keep our secret. He didn't know who I was and wasn't interested either."

"Good, Aslam. Here's the impression of the other key. I got it this evening. You had better go to Bareilly tonight. If you were to get the job done anywhere around here, the news may spread."

"I'll take a lift in a passing truck from here to Kathgodam. Early morning I'll take the bus to Bareilly."

"Be back fast, Aslam. I would hate to have to silence the *chowkidar*."



Billu is Desperate

BY the 29th of September, Billu was desperate. Would the keys be made in time? He had to deliver the idol to Jericho on the 5th of October.

He made a quick calculation. Delhi on the 4th. Bareilly on the 3rd. Leave Almora on the 2nd.

So, by the 1st of October the task must be completed. The vision of racing ahead of the police after a night's burglary was terrifying. The picture of the hail of bullets he had seen ten years ago flashed before his eyes. No, it must be a clean get-away.

That meant the *chowkidar* at the library must be got out of the way for half-an-hour without raising suspicion. The police patrol, the *chowkidar* at the Commissioner's office and the newly-appointed one at the library hailed each other every ten minutes. They met one or the other every half-hour.

Suppose one of them was to lure the *chowkidar* away and shout the all-clear, would it work? If the other *chowkidar* or the policeman had something to say or felt like exchanging a few words, the game would be up. Jericho wanted six clear months before even the theft was discovered.

Even if the keys did come in time, how could they do it? If Sher Singh detained the *chowkidar* for ten minutes, Aslam could open the outer door, let him and Machiah inside and lock it again.

From the outside, the library would look the same with the lock intact. After half-an-hour, he could let them out the same way. The fake will be inside and the original in the packing case. And no one will know.

This was the best plan Billu could think of. There was no doubt an element of risk in it. Suppose Sher

Singh was not able to get the *chowkidar* out of the way? Suppose the other *chowkidar* walked across? Or the police party called out from the road below? One could not fake the return call from above unless the *chowkidar* was far away. How could one take him so far away without raising suspicion?

Billu needed a foolproof plan. The stakes were high. The fortune of a lifetime. No, he must find a way. A diversion was called for. Something that would draw everyone's attention elsewhere. What? A fire? A robbery? The diversion itself must not arouse suspicion. Billu kept pondering over this question.

Professor Makes a List

ON the morning of the 29th of September, Professor Shastri rang up K.D.

"K.D., I have studied those slides. When can we discuss them?"

"I'll be at your office at 11."

"Righto, see you then, K.D."

At 11, K.D. parked his motorcycle and ran up the steps to Professor Shastri's office.

"Sit down, K.D. Here's a list of idols shown in slides one to eighteen. I have marked with a cross all those not yet dated. I have put a circle across five idols that may turn out to be more valuable than the idol shown in slide nineteen. Mind you, this is just a guess. You may scan the list at your leisure."

K.D. looked at the list. It still did not offer any clues. The five idols belonged to places as far away as

Tiruchirapally in Tamil Nadu, Malinithan in Arunachal Pradesh, Jageshwar near Almora and Orissa. To make enquiries about them at these places would take at least a week. But, there was no other way.

“Thank you, Professor. I’ll be along in a few days to ask more questions.”

Drums and Dances

ON the 29th of September, the dress rehearsal for the Governor’s visit was held at Ramjey School. The election fever had reached a new high. People had begun to lay bets on the likely winner, with no clear outcome in sight. Since the elections were on the 1st of October, the 29th of September was the last day of canvassing.

So, the rehearsal for the dances took place amidst last-minute canvassing.

Vikram and Rajat were already in their seats. Sonia and Pinku were helping Jiwanti dress for her dance items.

At 9 o’clock, the rehearsal began. The first item was the welcome dance, a ritual on all festive occasions called *Jhor Baira*.

The ground was deserted. With rhythmic steps a line of boys and another of girls came down the sides and moved in circles.

The girls wore colourful *ghagaras*, or thick multi-coloured skirts, with heavy *duppattas** draped on top.

* stoles

Their bangles shone in the sunlight as myriad pairs of hands and feet moved in perfect unison. Soon, like rainbows descending from the clouds, the girls formed two large arcs.

The boys were in a row inside the arcs. Their white pyjamas looked like shining pillars reflected in water. With the girls moving round and round, the dance had a mesmeric effect on the children sitting with Chili on the edge of their chairs.

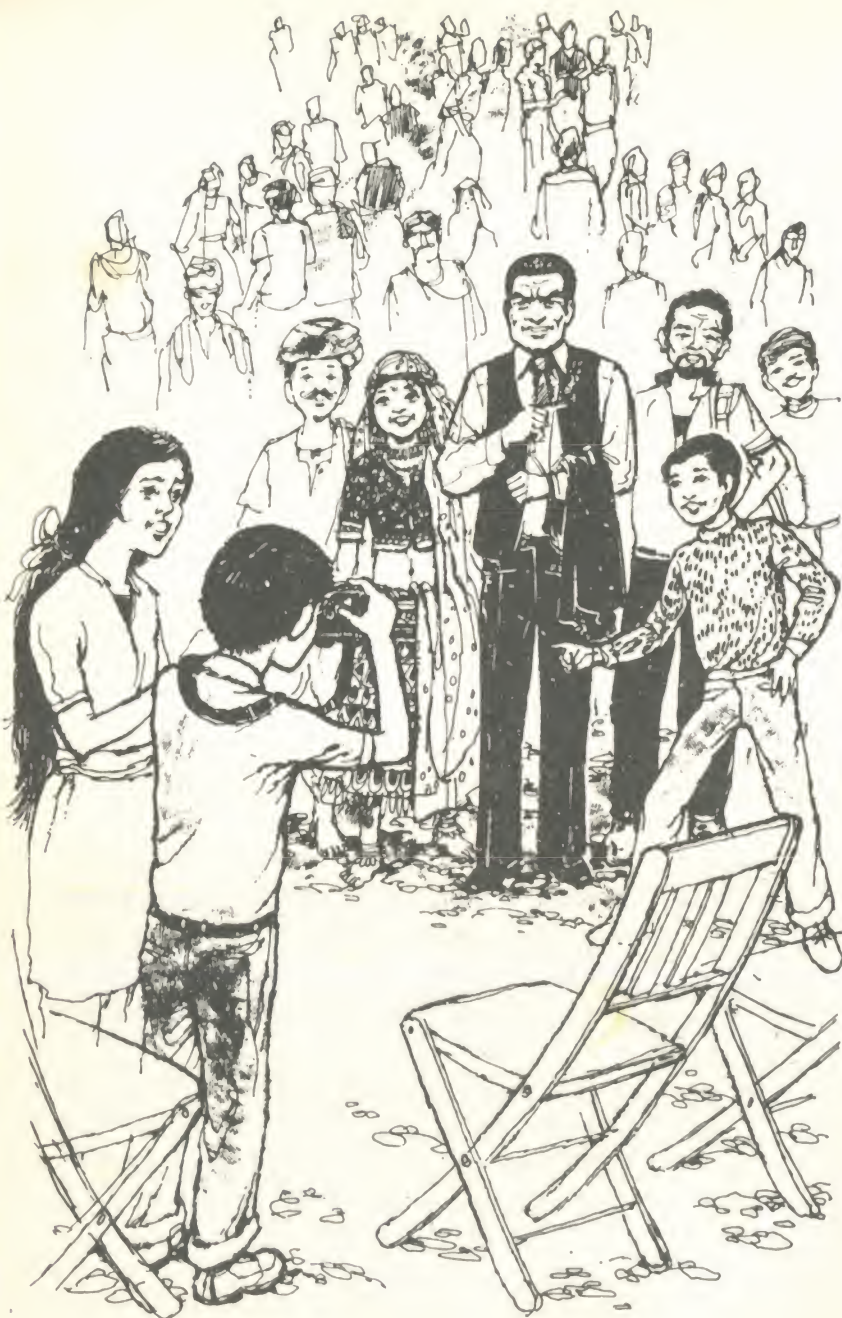
The boys flourished colourful handkerchiefs. At once, the circles broke up. Boys and girls paired off, dancing tumultuously. Even the spectators swayed to the infectious rhythm.

Moving together, Billu and Machiah filmed the dance from various angles. Sometimes from a corner, sometimes close to a pair of dancers, they wove their way in and out.

The next dance was the *Hurki Baul*, the sowing of paddy to the rhythm of the *hurki*, a small drum held in the hand. Rows of girls and boys dressed in colourful clothes went through the motions of sowing paddy to the accompaniment of melodious and rhythmic chantings.

The last item was the *Ghasyari*, the dance of the grass cutters. A row of boys and a row of girls danced at either end of the ground. The leading dancers mimed a song sung by the rest. They were Jiwanti and Bhoovan. The song was a series of questions and answers.

The boy asked the girl who she was and where she was from. The girl told him the name of her village and said she had come to cut grass. The boy objected. She offered several reasons why she must cut the grass. At the end, the girl said her sister needed the grass for her buffalo. The boy wanted to know who her sister was. The girl mentioned her sister’s name,



adding that the boy, who had moved closer, looked very much like her sister's husband. With feigned shock, the boy admitted he was her sister's husband and told her to cut as much grass as she wanted. Then the two danced out of view.

The children were thrilled.

"Why, they were simply superb!" said Sonia.

"The scheduled programme is only for two hours. Otherwise, they could have danced all night," said Mr. Pande, who had organised the show.

When Jiwanti and Bhoovan joined them, the crowd gave the two a standing ovation.

Billu and Machiah had, meanwhile, completed the shooting.

"Come," said Billu walking up to the children, "let's photograph you with the dancers."

"Uncle, now you and Machiah Uncle stand here. I want to take a photograph of all of you."

Rajat clicked his camera.

Election Fever

THE parents of Bhoovan and Jiwanti had come to see them dance. In the afternoon when Billu and Machiah were filming the election scenes, they met Bhoovan's father.

"I'm sure Bhoovan will win the elections," asserted Billu.

"Yes, but what's the use?"

"Why, it is a great honour."

"With an unmarried grown-up girl sitting at home?"
 "You mean Jiwanti?"
 "Yes, who else?"
 "She has yet to complete her education."
 "Of what use is education when eventually she has to get married and set up house?"
 "She could take up a career."
 "There is no other career for a girl."
 "Times have changed, sir."
 "Have they? I haven't noticed."
 "They have. Today, girls do work."
 "She's not married already because I don't have the five thousand rupees to spend on it. We have already found for her a boy in Garam Pani. As soon as I have the money, her education stops."
 Billu discreetly left the place. He went round the school. He could see the children moving about, Chili at their heels. He went to the canteen for a cup of tea. There he saw a gloomy Thakur Singh.
 "Why, what's the matter?"
 "I have lost."
 "How do you know?"
 "I can sense the mood."
 "Why this change today? Until yesterday, the odds were in your favour."
 "You want to know the cause?"
 "Yes."
 "You!"
 "I?"
 "Yes."
 "How?"
 "With your film unit, you have become quite a hero here in this small place. You're friendly with Jiwanti. Most of the shooting you did today involves her and Bhoovan. She's Bhoovan's sister. So, the boys and girls have changed sides. Had you not come to Almora,

I would have won."
 'Strange logic,' thought Billu as he moved away. At another place, he could hear people talking.
 "We need a President who can stand up to the authorities and fight for our rights. Can either of them do it?"
 "Yes, Thakur Singh can. He is rich and brave."
 "Look, we have to choose between them. There's no third choice. We must choose the braver of the two."
 "How do we know either of them can do it? Today Mr. Budhi Ballabh was so rude to us. Just because he is a government officer? Yet, can anyone defy even such a minor officer? No. So, where's the choice?"

On the evening of the 29th, Aslam came back with the keys. Billu was happy. This was a good omen. He had just two days left to carry out his plan. On the night of the 30th or the 1st. Afterwards it would be too late.

On the 30th, Thakur Singh announced a treat for all the children at the canteen. By midday, however, it was clear that, except for his henchmen, no one was coming.

The failure of this gimmick had put paid to whatever little chance Thakur Singh had of winning. The tide had turned in favour of Bhoovan.

Billu heard about it from Jiwanti. But he was no more interested in the elections. How to get rid of the *chowkidar* for half-an-hour from the library was his one thought.

Light at Last

JUST after lunch on the 30th of September, Professor Shastri called K.D. on the phone. He was excited.

"K.D., I just got a letter from our Lucknow office. It's a report about the locations of the various idols listed. It indicates that the Governor is visiting Almora tomorrow. For his benefit some of the idols from the temples around Almora have been moved there. They include those on slide four, which I have crossed and circled. In other words, one of the five may be more valuable than the Bhopal idol on slide nineteen.

"What's more, K.D., at the bottom of the report there's a handwritten note from my colleague. It reads: Five recently excavated idols from Jageshwar were moved to Almora, causing slight inconvenience to a film company making a documentary. The unit is now in Almora. Hope the filming of the idols is not objectionable as they are still undated. Sanction for the film project appears to be in order and was given only a fortnight ago. Well, that's it, K.D. Does it mean anything?"

"You couldn't have given me a clearer picture, Professor. Note that sanction for the film is only a fortnight old and the film company has already been there for ten days."

"Pretty fast work, it appears to be."

"Well, thanks, Professor."

At a quarter to three in the afternoon, K.D. was with the D.I.G.

"Sir, there are too many coincidences. A man asks a question at Professor Shastri's meeting and then gives a false identity. The same man visits the

biryani shop. He's not on our criminal records. He gives our man the slip and disappears. That was three weeks ago.

"There are, as per this list, five idols his question could pertain to. One of them is now in Almora.

"Out of the blue turns up a film company with the necessary sanction to make a documentary. The unit has also moved to Almora.

"As I said, sir, too many coincidences. Or part of a well-laid plan. Something tells me it is the same man. We must move fast."

"K.D., the conjectures do add up. But they are still conjectures. So, I suggest you go over to Almora. You have missed today's flight to Phoolbagh. Either you take the train tonight or take a flight tomorrow."

That night, K.D. was on the train for Kathgodam.

A Brilliant Move

AROUND dusk, on the 30th of September an idea struck Billu. So superb an idea that he wondered why he had not thought of it earlier.

He went to the Ramjey School hostel. There he met Thakur Singh.

"I know I have been the cause of your unpopularity. You were right when you said you would have won but for my presence here."

"I know, but there's nothing that can be done now."

"No, you are wrong, there is. Provided you have the courage to do it."

"What's it?"

"A formula for sure success!"

"Don't pull my leg now."

"I'm serious. I can give you a plan which will guarantee your success tomorrow."

"Why should you?"

"Because I have thought over what you said. I feel bad that, because of me, the better candidate may lose."

"All right. Tell me."

"My plan is simple. Tonight, after dinner, talk to the boys. They are very angry with Mr. Budhi Ballabh, the Development Officer, for the way he treated them yesterday morning. You tell the boys that they should go tonight and kidnap this gentleman."

"Kidnap him?"

"Yes, force him to come with you. Bring him to your hostel. Shout slogans. But do not manhandle him."

"Then?"

"The news will spread. When the district authorities get there, I will intercede. I'll pretend to negotiate. You refuse to talk to anyone else. I'll ask you to release him. You do so. I'll tell the district authorities that your condition is that the action be condoned and the elections be held as planned."

"What will happen?"

"A landslide victory for you. The school children will follow anyone who can lead. Your having agreed to listen to me will give you the same boost as Jiwanti's friendship with me. The elections start at 9 a.m. By midday, you'll be the President."

"Fantastic. I believe you are right. This should work. Will you come in time to negotiate? Don't let me down. Or else I won't know what to do."

"My only condition is, don't ever tell anyone I gave you this plan. You see, Bhoovan and Jiwanti

will never forgive me. Yet, for their sake, I cannot see a better candidate losing."

"Thank you, Mr. Kumar. I'll do as you say. You must be there as early as you can."

"I'll be there as soon as the district authorities assemble."

At 11 o'clock that night, Mr. Budhi Ballabh was woken up and carried away by a mob of slogan-shouting boys. He was pushed around, but not hurt. He was taken to the hostel and forced to sit on a chair.

The news spread like wild fire. Mr. Raina asked the police to surround the hostel.

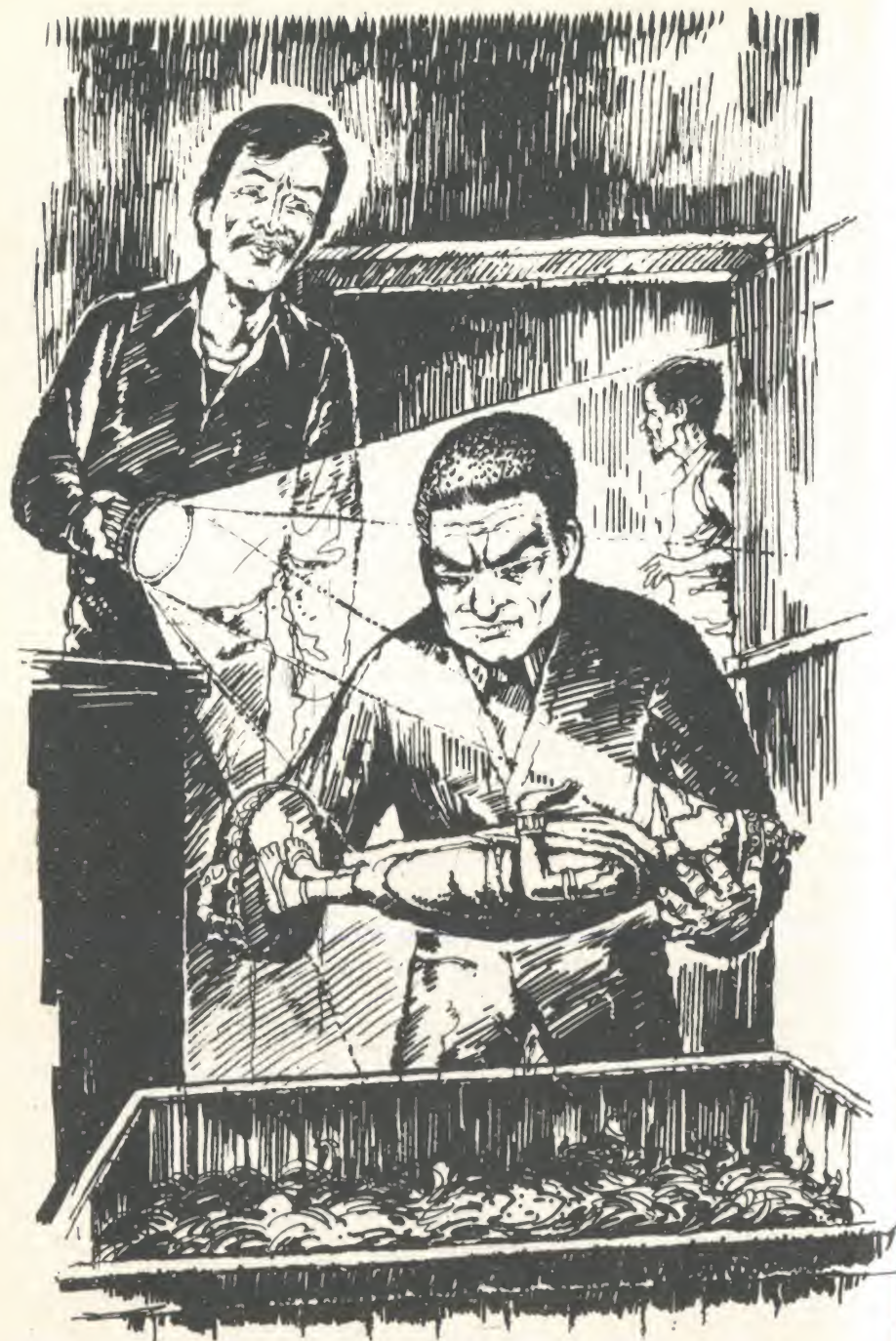
As soon as the men at the police post were alerted, Sher Singh, who was smoking a *beedi* with them, yelled the news to Billu and others. He told the *chowkidars* that all hands were required at the hostel. Those were Mr. Raina's orders.

He started running towards the hostel, the *chowkidars* following him.

At once Billu, Aslam and Machiah swung into action. Machiah carried the packing case. Aslam opened the locks. Billu switched the idols. In ten minutes, the library door was locked with the fake inside.

"Here's the original," said Machiah, shutting the packing case tight. "I have put a green sticking plaster on top to identify it."

A little later Billu reached the hostel. Mr. Raina was bellowing like an angry bull. He had never seen or heard such nonsense. He threatened dire conse-



quences if the boys did not behave.

Yet the fear that the boys might harm the hostage made him act with caution.

Billu came as a saviour. He quickly patched up the matter. As Mr. Raina returned, happy for the safe return of the hostage, he joked with Billu.

"Boys will be boys. I'm glad you were around. Thanks a lot."

The voting started at 9 in the morning. From the very beginning, it was clear that the scales had tipped overnight in his favour. Thakur Singh was now the hero of the day.

At 9.30 Billu met Mr. Raina.

"If you permit me, sir, I'll return to New Delhi. I have an important engagement. I have finished all the shooting I had wanted to do."

At 10 he met Jiwanti.

"I am leaving now. I shall write to you before the end of the month. I shall also send your air ticket from Phoolbagh to Bombay. Have faith in me."

"Uncle, I have changed my mind. I'm coming with you now."

"Now? You can't, Jiwanti."

"I can't stay here. Bhoovan heard from some boys that you met Thakur Singh last evening. You were the one who negotiated with the boys last night. He feels you helped Thakur Singh win. Now they'll never let me go. I have a feeling he'll take my father's side and force me to marry. No, Uncle, I must go now."

Billu could see that Jiwanti was desperate. You cannot argue with a desperate person.

"Your travelling in my vehicle will look odd. Look, I'm going in half-an-hour. I'll wait for you at Garam Pani, which is just two hours away. You come by the

11 o'clock bus. From there you can come with me."

Half-an-hour later, Billu went to meet Jiwanti's father.

The old man looked sad and weary. Billu gave him an envelope. The old man peered inside and nearly fell off the chair.

"What's this for?"

"Just a gift of the five thousand you need to marry Jiwanti off. I agree with you, education is not good for her."

"What made you change your mind?"

"I heard from some children here that Jiwanti is planning to run away by the 11 o'clock bus. That is why I came to you. I am leaving now. If you give me the address, I'll tell those people at Garam Pani to arrange for the wedding. I'll tell them that you are coming with Jiwanti."

"That'll be wonderful!"

"Only, tell Jiwanti at the bus stop not to go by bus. Tell her that you will take her to Garam Pani and I'll meet her there. You must let her believe that if she wants to leave home, she can depend on me to take her to Delhi or Bombay wherever she chooses to go. As for the marriage, tell her it was Bhoovan who had arranged it. Then she is more likely to come willingly."

At Garam Pani, Billu stopped at the given address. He told them to arrange for a wedding at the *mandir** the same day.

* temple

The Protest March

K.D. left for Almora in the morning by taxi. He reached Garam Pani at 1 o'clock. As he stopped for lunch, he found that the roads were choked with boys shouting slogans.

"The school boys are on strike," the driver told him. "Let's have a quick lunch, *Sahib* and leave in another ten minutes before we get caught in the melee."

After a hurried lunch they made their way out. Just in time, for soon the roads were jam-packed.

"What's that strike for?" asked K.D.

"I believe the boys in Almora had some trouble with the police. Too many rumours here. Some say there was a lathi charge and a number of boys were hurt. The boys here are taking out a protest march."



After arranging the wedding at Garam Pani, Billu found himself caught on the wrong side of the crowd.

"Sher Singh, park the jeep this side. Let's have a quick snack. Then we'll see if we can get through."



Jiwanti was surprised beyond words when her father suggested he would take her to Garam Pani. As they walked away from the bus stop, she was wondering whether she did right in leaving home. Was it not silly of her?

About the same time, she realised they were moving towards a house above the road. She could hear singing and rejoicing. Was this where Billu would meet her?

Then realisation dawned on her. She was a captive

bride!

It was too late. She dare not try to run. She was powerless.

"Father! Where are we going?" Her voice was choked.

"Be quiet, Bhoovan has arranged it. Don't be difficult."

So that was it. That explained the change in her father's behaviour.

As she went forward like an automation, there was a cloud-burst. People rushed for shelter.

Instinctively, Jiwanti turned and raced downhill!

Billu and Sher Singh trailed behind the last of the protesters. To their utter surprise they saw Jiwanti come rushing towards their jeep.

"Thank God you are here!" she exclaimed scrambling in unceremoniously. "Now take me away. My father and brother had conspired together. I thought I was done for."

The road cleared and Sher Singh pressed the accelerator.

By midday, though counting was only half done, the election result was obvious.

Dejected, Bhoovan plodded his weary way home. He found the house locked.

He rushed to the library. Mr. Raina told him that Jiwanti had left for Garam Pani by the 11 o'clock bus. She had given the key to Mr. Raina.

At the bus stand Bhoovan learnt that his father had gone with Jiwanti. Where to? Why hadn't they told him?

As he stood dazed, an army jonga passed by. He raised a hand.

"Hello, Sonia! You know Jiwanti has gone!"



"Has she? She promised she would not go without telling us."

"I don't know what to do. She has disappeared. How did you know she was planning to go?"

"She told us she was going with Mr. Kumar to become a film star in Bombay."

"What? But she's gone with my father!"

"Mr. Kumar also left today. Where are you going?"

"I don't know. I have nowhere to go."

"Then, come with us. Let's ask the others what to do."

The Search Begins

COLONEL Johri heard Bhoovan's account at lunch. He rang up Mr. Raina. If Jiwanti was missing, only Mr. Raina could inform the police and ask them to investigate.

At 3.30 in the afternoon Mr. Raina joined them. He had got the news that Bhoovan's father was at Garam Pani and had lodged a case with the police about Jiwanti's running away from home. Mr. Raina had asked the police in Kathgodam to try and stop Jiwanti boarding a train. Her father had given them a description of the clothes she was wearing.

"Now what, Colonel? It looks as if Jiwanti has vanished into thin air."

"We must all go in search of her now," said Pinku.

"Of course, we must," chorused Rajat. "Chili will help us find her. He knows Jiwanti so well."

"I have just learnt jungle craft and spooning," said Vikram. "We'll get her before she is completely lost

in the jungle she has fled into."

"Please, Uncle, let's go. I can't bear to think of Jiwanti running away like this."

Colonel Johri's orderly, Balkar, came in.

"A police officer, Mr. K.D. Rao, to see you, sir."

"Welcome, K.D. You are really a godsend."

Briefly Colonel Johri told him about Jiwanti's disappearance.

"First, tell me where is the film unit that was here?"

"They have gone."

"When?"

"Today."

"And Jiwanti also disappeared today? Just a coincidence? Could Jiwanti's disappearance be connected with them?"

"No, Uncle," Sonia was positive. "Jiwanti was planning to go with Mr. Kumar to Bombay to become a film star."

"Tell me, Mr. Raina, has your museum been burgled?"

"No, of course not."

"Are you sure? Can we see it?"

All of them rushed to the museum. K.D. asked for a check. All the idols were there. He himself recognised the Jageshwar statues from the slides he had seen.

"That's a great relief!" said K.D. "They are very valuable, Mr. Raina. See that they are kept safely."

"Why this concern for the statues, K.D.?"

"I'll tell you as we go along. Let's start for Kathgodam. We have to find Jiwanti now. Mr. Raina, you had better join us. Please ensure that this place is well guarded."

It was around 8 in the evening when Sher Singh

reported the broken spring. "We can't go on to Bareilly now, Billu. We must find some place to rest for the night."

Aslam was firm. They must have the vehicle repaired. He knew a place in Kathgodam where he would get it done.

"Where can we go for the night?"

"Why not the Inspection Bungalow near Kathgodam railway station?"

"We have to unload the luggage. Aslam can't take a loaded vehicle for repair. We need a lonely place."

"I know the right place," said Jiwanti. "There's a shack below the I.B. It's deserted and spacious. The I.B. *chowkidar* is from our village. Once we were stuck here when the Almora road was blocked. The *chowkidar* put us up in the shack for the night."

At the shack, they unloaded the vehicle. Then Aslam drove away. Billu arranged for food. Once they had eaten, they were ready to go to sleep.

"You take that other room. Go to sleep, Jiwanti. Tomorrow we'll get going."

Jiwanti lay on the bare floor. In the moonlight streaming in through the small window, she noticed a wooden packing case. Out of sheer curiosity, she peeped through an aperture.

What she saw sent a chill down her spine!

Inside the packing case was a statue from the museum in Almora. She was almost tempted to ask Billu when she heard footsteps.

She closed her eyes and pretended to be fast asleep. The man came nearer. Jiwanti was frightened. The man put his foot close to Jiwanti's face. It was obvious that he was checking whether she was asleep.

The footsteps retreated.

"She is asleep. Now tell us your plan. When do we get our money?"

Jiwanti was already crouching behind the door.

"Listen, carefully. The original statue is here near my bed. It's marked with this green tape. The broken fake is in the other case. We destroy the fake at Bareilly.

"Tomorrow we go to Bareilly. My landrover is parked there. We get into that and move on to Delhi.

"At Bareilly, Aslam will have the vehicle repainted. The correct licence number will be restored and it'll be sold. Then Aslam will join us in Delhi by the 5th of October.

"The rest of us relax in Delhi. I have arrangements to make. At 10 p.m. on the 5th, I meet Jericho at Golf Links. It's a house with a blue roof. Inside is a hall with strange mirrors. Thank God, I'll be seeing it for the last time. That place gives me the jitters.

"You all will wait outside. In half-an-hour, I'll come out with the money and pay you your shares. Then we part company."

"That's wonderful, Billu. Only tell me, why should we give Jericho this priceless idol? Why don't we sell it ourselves?"

"Because Jericho will have you arrested wherever you are, in India or abroad. I'm afraid, it won't be wise to do that."

"Let's give him the fake then. The crack is hardly visible. Before he notices the crack and realises it's a fake, we would have sold the original, shared the booty and vanished."

"Jericho has thought of that too. When I go to deliver the idol, there'll be an expert present. Only after he confirms that the idol is genuine do we get the money."

"There's no way out?"

"None, Machiah. There's no way of getting the better of Jericho."

"You are the boss, Billu. You call the tune."

There was a moment's silence as Machiah and Sher Singh lit their cigarettes.

"I must say, Billu, the diversion was a stroke of genius on your part. The way you made Thakur Singh rise to the bait. The entire strategy was brilliant. No one will ever suspect that while everyone including the *chowkidars*, was away at the hostel, we used duplicate keys, opened the library, and changed the idol for a fake."

"By the way, Billu, what do we do with the girl? It's a nuisance having her with us."

"I know. At Almora I offered to get her into the films. She fell for it."

Billu gave them a detailed account of the Jiwanti episode.

"You are really clever, Billu," said Sher Singh. "She has served her purpose. Now what?"

"We have to get rid of her," agreed Billu. "Not here but in Delhi. It's easier and safer there."

Jiwanti, crouching behind the door, was so badly shaken that she broke into a fit of uncontrollable sobbing.

Billu rushed into the room, pulling out a knife.

Machiah held him back.

"No boss, not here."

"She knows our secret. She must die."

Billu looked like the devil himself to Jiwanti. She was sprawled on the floor, shuddering.

"Let her be, boss. I'll tie her up."

Machiah bound her ankles and hands and gagged her with the same green tape.

"That'll take care of her till morning."

At 10 o'clock Colonel Johri, Mr. Raina, K.D. and the children reached Kathgodam.

"Sorry, sir, no trace of her," the head constable at the railway station told them.

"Let's go for the night to the I.B. There, we'll plan our next move."

Resting at the bungalow, K.D. told them of his own suspicions about Mr. Kumar.

"I have here a photograph of the man I'm looking for. Is this Mr. Kumar?"

"Sorry, K.D. This man has never been in Almora." K.D. was puzzled.

Rajat and Vikram too took a close look at the photograph. They whispered to each other, patently excited.

Then Rajat took a photograph from his bag and handed it to Vikram. Vikram borrowed K.D.'s ball pen.

"Uncle, this is a photograph of Mr. Kumar that Rajat took only a few days ago. Now watch."

Vikram added a moustache to the face and made the hair longer.

"Good heavens, K.D.!" Mr. Raina almost shouted. "That's the man you are looking for."

"Marvellous, boys! You're right," said a beaming K.D. patting their shoulders.

Vikram caught Rajat's hand, their hearts swelling with justifiable pride.

"Anyway," continued K.D., "there's nothing we can do tonight. Let's sleep. We have a long day tomorrow. We have to find Jiwanti. And the truth about Mr. Kumar. Good night everyone."

Inside the shack near the Inspection Bungalow, Jiwanti was weeping with pain and fear. What a fool she was. Sonia and Pinku had warned her. Too late now. Wonder where they all were? Wonder where Bhoovan was? So, it was not Bhoovan who had



misguided her father, but this Mr. Kumar.

There was nothing she could do to free herself. It must be past midnight. A few more hours and they would kill her.

Sixth Sense

A little after midnight, Chili woke up. Restless, he began to whimper.

Since none of the children stirred, Chili went outside. Still whimpering, he sniffed, head cocked to one side and then to the other.

Down the slope he scampered and was soon circling the shack.

Beneath a small window Chili paused and sniffed. The scent he was following was obviously quite strong. For, he took a flying leap and landed softly inside.

Jiwanti was terrified. Then a flood of relief swept through her as she recognised Chili. He was sniffing her hands and feet.

Then, as quickly as he had come, he was gone.

Back at the bungalow, Chili tugged at Rajat's pyjamas. He was still fast asleep.

The dog nuzzled his toes, whimpering impatiently all the time. Rajat awoke and saw Chili. "Bow wow!" barked the dog, tugging at his pyjamas furiously.

The boy was alert at once. He woke up the others. "Quick!" he cried. "Chili has seen something. Come on, let's follow him."

The dog led the children to the shack. As they crouched silently by the window, Chili jumped through it.

Vikram and Rajat followed him in and entered the room where Jiwanti lay. They freed the girl and she cautioned them to be quiet.

Then all of them sneaked out of the shack. Once outside, they took cover behind a thick clump of bushes and shrubs. As luck would have it the moon was hidden behind a large mass of cloud.

Crouching in the semi darkness, Jiwanti briefed the children. Her whispering carried a note of urgency. Afterwards they could be seen flitting about the place like shadows.

Some fifteen minutes later the group made its way to the Inspection Bungalow. Safely in bed Jiwanti talked to them some more. It was well past 3 o'clock when they fell asleep.

Secret of Mr. Kumar

EARLY in the morning Colonel Johri, Mr. Raina and K.D. sat in the verandah sipping tea and planning their next move. Bhoovan, who had slept in K.D.'s room, also came out to join them.

"Uncle, we have to find Jiwanti today."

"Yes. Tell me, do you have any relations nearby to whom she could have gone?"

"No, Uncle. She ran away in panic, as we found out at Garam Pani. She must have got a lift in some vehicle. She has fled into the jungle. There she won't survive even a single night."

"Who won't survive?"

The three men couldn't believe their eyes! There, right before them, stood Jiwanti rubbing the sleep

out of her weary eyes!

"Jiwanti!" Bhoovan ran to her.

By then the other four children and Chili had trooped out.

"Where were you, Jiwanti?" asked Mr. Raina. "How did you manage to land up here?"

"Breakfast first, Uncle. Then I'll tell you."

After a hearty breakfast, Jiwanti told them all that had happened to her right from the beginning about Mr. Kumar and the Blue Arrow Film Company.

"I met Mr. Kumar at Garam Pani. He gave me a lift. On the way, his vehicle developed trouble. So we stayed the night in the shack down there.

"At night I overheard their conversation. Mr. Kumar is a thief who steals idols and statues from temples and museums. I also overheard their plans for the 5th of October at New Delhi. At night, thanks to Chili and these children, I was able to get out of the shack and come here."

"What's this about the 5th of October, Jiwanti?" asked K.D. "I'm a police officer and have come in search of Mr. Kumar."

"I know Mr. Kumar has removed his moustache and cut his hair. I also know of the secret meeting that is to take place on the 5th of October at New Delhi."

"Tell us all you know."

Jiwanti looked at each of the children. Sonia smiled and tossed her long hair about her shoulders. Pinku pushed her spectacles higher on her nose and winked. Vikram whistled and Rajat delivered a karate chop to fell an imaginary enemy.

"The meeting, Uncle, is between Mr. Kumar and his boss Jericho."

"They meet at Golf Links," cut in Sonia.

"The house has a sloping blue roof," added Pinku.
"Inside the house is a hall with mirrors," was Vikram's contribution.

"The meeting is at 10 p.m.," said Rajat.

"Jericho and his men will leave the country that very night."

"Mr. Kumar's gang will also be there outside the house at Golf Links."

K.D., Mr. Raina and Colonel Johri heard the children with rapt attention.

"Well, K.D.," said the Colonel, "you have all the answers. You can nab the whole lot of them."

"Why not apprehend Mr. Kumar right here?" asked Mr. Raina. "They must be in the shack."

"Exactly," agreed K.D., rising to his feet.

"No, Uncle," said Jiwanti, "the vehicle was repaired last night itself, at Kathgodam. They must have left half-an-hour ago."

"You mean the bird has flown!" exclaimed K.D. "Why didn't you tell me earlier? I would have arrested him straightaway."

"If you had arrested him, K.D.," said Colonel Johri, "wouldn't Jericho have got away scot-free?"

"A bird in the hand is always better than two in the bush. Anyway, let me not waste more time. I must be off to New Delhi at once. Can I take your vehicle up to Phoolbagh, Colonel?"

"Sure, K.D. And best of luck. Do keep us informed."

An Exchange of Letters

On the 13th of October Mr. Raina received a letter from K.D. He opened it only after Colonel Johri,



the children and Jiwanti had gathered in the library.

The envelope contained a newspaper clipping. It read:

New Delhi October 6. Following a reliable tip-off, the Special Crime Branch in New Delhi has rounded up one of the biggest gangs of idol lifters in India.

Last night, the Special Branch men surrounded a posh house at Golf Links. A few minutes after 10 they heard a shot. As the occupants rushed out, they were rounded up.

A foreigner, believed to be the leader of the gang, was caught with an idol and a briefcase containing almost forty lakhs of rupees in currency notes.

The idol is believed to be a stolen piece.

Another gang waiting outside the place in a landrover was also nabbed.

Inside the house, a man was found lying in a pool of blood. He was rushed to hospital, where, after an emergency operation to remove a bullet, he was said to be serious but out of danger. He has been identified as Mr. Baldev Kumar, alias Billu, said to be a top operator in the racket of stealing precious idols from temples and museums all over India.

The police suspect that the foreigner, having obtained the idol from Billu, shot him and was trying to make away with both the idol and the cash. What is not clear is why he carried so much cash if he had no intention of paying for the idol. Further details are awaited.

The arrest of a number of other contact

men and small time operators is believed to be impending.

Pinned to the clipping was a hand-written note from K.D.

P.S.—The idol is cracked and has been declared a fake by Professor Shastri. It is a copy of one of the Jageshwar idols now in Almora. The Professor suspects the fake to be a copy of a rare idol of Arjuna. Wonder what the mystery of the fake Arjuna is!

—K.D.

On the 17th of October, K.D. got a letter from Jiwanti. He read it a number of times. Later he read it out to Professor Shastri and the D.I.G.

Almora

October 14

My dear Uncle K.D.,

Sonia, Pinku, Vikram, Rajat and Chili are with me as I write this letter. So, it's really a joint letter. We have read the newspaper clipping you sent us. There are some facts that will never come to light certainly not through the press. These we want to share with you.

When I ran away at Garam Pani, I accidentally ran into Billu. It was I who suggested to him that we stop for the night in a shack below the Inspection Bungalow.

In the shack, I overheard their plans.

I heard Billu tell the others that the original idol was in a packing case marked with a green tape. The fake was in the room where I was.

I heard too that Billu was intending to get rid of me in Delhi. When they discovered I

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was awake, I was bound and gagged.

How did I escape! Well, thereby hangs a tale. Chili and the children came to my rescue! We'll tell you more about it when we meet.

Once we were out of the shack, we should have made a bee line for the bungalow and alerted you. But I had another idea. When I told the children, they were unanimous that it was the best course of action.

Rajat and Vikram, leading the way, all of us re-entered the shack. We managed to switch the idols. The original was taken out of the case with the green tape and the fake put in its place.

The case which contained the fake was filled with stones, for they were going to dump it in the river.

We returned to the bungalow with the original Arjuna idol. It is now where it was during the Governor's visit!

The fake they left behind in Almora is in the proud possession of Mr. Raina, our gift to him!

Tomorrow, Pinku and Rajat are going back to their schools and Sonia and Vikram to Durgapur.

Hope you will forgive us for not letting you in on our secret.

If Billu could switch idols, why shouldn't we? We were just taking a leaf out of his book!

With our fondest love,

Jiwanti and the rest of the gang.

P.S.:—I hope this clears the mystery of the fake Arjuna.